

**UNDERSTANDING SUPERINTENDENTS' SELF-EFFICACY
INFLUENCES ON INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP
AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

A Dissertation

by

KENNETH RAY WHITT

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2009

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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ABSTRACT

Understanding Superintendents' Self-Efficacy Influences on Instructional
Leadership and Student Achievement. (December 2009)

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This dissertation explores public school superintendent self-efficacy influences on instructional and student achievement within three Texas public school districts. The purpose of this research study was to investigate superintendent self-efficacy and its perceived influence on instructional leadership in districts with persistent student achievement inequities for economically disadvantaged and students of color.

This study specifically focused on three White male public school superintendents with varying numbers of student populations that have large percentages of economically disadvantaged students and students of color. Two research questions guided the inquiry process:

1. How do superintendents in school districts in which children of color and children from low-income homes persistently under-perform perceive their effectiveness in the area of instructional leadership?

2. What are superintendents' perceptions about how their instructional leadership beliefs are influenced by the context of federal and state accountability in which they work?

This study employed a qualitative method of investigation utilizing a case-study approach to examine the perceptions, beliefs, and views of participating superintendents. Two in-depth interviews with each school superintendent served as primary data collection sources, while field notes, personal observations, email, and phone conversations served as secondary and clarifying sources. Data were interpreted using a critical interpretivist lens.

This inquiry contributes to the body of superintendent practice and limited research scholarship by assisting in the understanding of perceived superintendent self-efficacy influences on instructional leadership and student achievement. These understandings have additional implications for the intersection of power, privilege, and emancipatory critical constructs for superintendents with populations of economically disadvantaged students and students of color. Findings from this study serve to highlight needed calls to action and reforms in superintendent preparatory programs, research scholarship, professional organizations, and regional educational service centers.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my great-grandmother, Lizzie Tinsley, who took it upon herself to help raise “her three boys” and my mother, Mary, and father, Delbert Whitt, who reminded me many times that I could do anything if I really wanted it. Every child should be as fortunate as I have been to have the love and support that these three individuals have given me. I can only hope they realize how proud I am to be their son and great-grandson. Mom and Dad, this is possible because of you and no matter where completion of this dissertation leads me, I have you to thank. I love you both.

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“Never, never, never give up.” – Winston Churchill

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and I want you to know I love each of you and hope I have made you proud. Above all else, I want you to never give up on your dreams!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on public school superintendents' perceptions as effective educational leaders in an era of high-stakes accountability in which federal and state reforms have necessitated academic success and achievement for all students. The focus of this research study specifically examines superintendent self-efficacy in the area of instructional leadership in public school districts that have reported years of inequitable academic achievement for children of color and children from low-income homes.

This context of inequitable academic achievement for all students has driven, in part, a multitude of educational initiatives and reforms within the American public school educational system. Many of these reform initiatives have also resulted in an increased focus on and examination into the complex role district superintendents play as instructional leaders. Specifically, a crucial component in addressing student achievement inequities is gaining better understanding of superintendents' intrinsic perceptions of themselves as effective leaders in the face of accountability data that consistently shows underperformance and large achievement gaps within their districts.

To illustrate, a recent survey of effective leadership reported school superintendents (greater than 95%) rated themselves as either effective or very effective school leaders (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). In that same study, Glass and Franceschini (2007) suggested that superintendents identifying themselves as effective believe they

This dissertation follows the style of *The Journal of Educational Research*.

are actually “doing a good job and therefore should retain their job” (p. 52). As I reflect on the superintendents’ self-report assessments, I pose the question: *How can superintendents consider themselves to be effective leaders and be performing a good job if year-after-year large numbers of low income and students of color fail to meet minimum achievement standards?*

One response to this question that has received a considerable amount of attention in the research literature is based on a fundamental concept of deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997) and the belief that accountability systems can help displacing deficit thinking (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Both Valencia (1997) and Skrla and Scheurich (2001) argued compellingly that when a dominant deficit-thinking paradigm (belief in deficit view of educability for all children) existed within an educational organization, students from low-income homes and students of color are significantly and negatively impacted as demonstrated by performance “at or near the bottom of every measurement of educational attainment” (Skrla & Scheurich, p. 206). As reflected in state and national student performance assessments and accountability reports, student achievement for students of color and those from low socio-economic homes is persistently low and historically inequitable.

As district educational leaders, public school superintendents can play a crucial role in acknowledging the prevalent presence of deficit thinking and in making subsequent leadership decisions to move their district forward toward more positive equity achievement for all students (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). However, clearly this does not happen for all superintendents in all districts, as highly diverse, high-achieving

districts are still rare. Therefore, it is within the context of a shift in displacement of accountability producing a deficit thinking leading to movement toward achievement equity by school superintendents that this body of research was framed. In other words, if accountability causes some superintendents to re-evaluate their effectiveness as instructional leaders and to take steps to improve equity within their districts, why do other superintendents continue to rate themselves as effective when there has been no progress toward closing achievement gaps or raising student performance in their districts?

This study employed a qualitative inquiry approach that included the understanding that the researcher was the primary instrument by which the superintendents' perceptions of their own self-efficacy in the area of instructional leadership was explored. Associated contextual influences regarding the development of personal self-efficacy in this investigation also relied on uncovering actions, behaviors, and beliefs of school superintendent's that questionnaires, surveys, or quantitative inquiry could not yield. Just as qualitative inquiry employs traditional ethnography methods for attempted understanding and meaning, similarly, understanding the journey of the researcher toward this specific topic has prompted the development of multiple rationales for this study.

In this introductory chapter, I therefore present two rationales that have stimulated my interest and desire for conducting this exploratory investigation. The first is my own personal motivation employing reflexivity (Doucet, 2008) in a personal narrative; the second is the traditional academic approach that serves as the contextual

linkage of educational theory and research to process and practice. I will also briefly provide a study description that delineates a purpose, design, and significance of the study as well as the inclusion of limitations and implications for research and practice.

Personal Rationale

Eyes Closed Shut

My initial interest in the superintendency began in a most untraditional and unconventional manner. I became an elected school board member first and then realized the position that I really wanted was the one of a public school superintendent. Prior to this realization and my subsequent election, I had expressed an interest in running for the local school board to several people within my local community. I was encouraged to contact the school superintendent and to request a meeting in which to discuss my candidacy and the expectations for board member service.

For the most part, my awareness of the role and responsibility of the superintendent was primarily limited to social settings and gatherings in the community in which the superintendent was a visible attendant, if not participant. Sure, I recognized the superintendent was the school district educational leader, but it was not until I had completed my first term as a school trustee, did I realize the enormous complexity of the role and responsibility in which a school superintendent holds within the school system for leading school improvement and promoting student academic achievement.

While beginning my first term as a school trustee in a predominately White (approximately 60%), rural, and middle-class school district, I also began my teaching career in a nearby rural district of similar size and demographics. As I began to

understand the nature of the superintendency from both a board member and teacher perspective in an era of Texas Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (TAKS) accountability, I recall how each superintendent assumed the power and position reflected as educational and instructional leaders because of position and title but neither appeared to be overly concerned with student performance nor accountability.

In both instances I remember neither emphasized nor conveyed a sense of immediacy and urgency for student achievement, much less conduct any discussions on inequities of racially and economically diverse student populations. With approximately 40% of students representing students of color and their achievement trailing significantly below their White peers, some sort of eye-opening occurrence should have become obvious. Yet it was not! The conversation discourse was similar to, “Of course we would like our scores to be better; however, we recognize we have a little ways to go to help certain populations that are not quite there yet”! Mandatory district performance accountability reports and presentations to the board would reference student performance and that of all subpopulations, but the lack of equitable performance within those subpopulations appeared to be of little significance. It was referenced only at best in passing or within generalized comments regarding the district as a whole!

As I reflect on these comments and events, I ask myself “Why?” Why did I not see obvious schooling inequities that were occurring in my own alma mater and “Why?” did the superintendents not open our eyes as trustees to the inequities? One response to these questions suggested by Hoy and Miskel (1982) is that by conforming to specific organizational roles and expectations within a schooling social system, educational

leaders can consciously convince others to accept ownership and embrace the belief that while their actions and behaviors are benefiting the large population of students as a whole, they are simultaneously benefiting minority populations as well. This may have been the case. Both superintendents would default annual accountability discussions with the board and faculty to other individuals within the administration and remain relatively quiet throughout the dialogue. Perhaps, through their default to others, they had consciously convinced themselves the actions of the district at large were benefiting all students including minority and children from low-income homes.

I believe through their silence, they were able to remain in conformance with their own perception that “all is well,” and the underachievement for children of color and low-income homes is unavoidable. Upon reflection, the depth of the discussion discourse never scratched the surface of deficit rhetoric that Skrla and Scheurich (2001) report many superintendents and educational leaders possess.

As I continued in my subsequent tenure as a three-term board member and board president, I recall few in-depth conversations around the board table specifically focusing on student achievement, or the lack thereof. I observed firsthand the academic success of predominately White students and the lesser academic success of students of color and low socio-economic status by three experienced superintendents in my board tenure that maintained to be educational leaders who were producing effective instructional leadership and systemic academic success for students; just not all students. I was none the wiser! My eyes were wide shut! It was, however, these experiences that

guided my initial thoughts and prompting for becoming a school superintendent and thus engage my focus in this undertaking.

Eyes Wide Open

Having the desire to teach in a larger, urban, and culturally diverse school district prompted five years of varying teaching experiences with students that exhibited a full range of extreme high-to-low achievement levels with students coming from families of extreme high-to-low socio-economic wealth as well. Prompted by a wish to become a school administrator in close proximity to a major university for graduate school completion, I moved to a small, rural school district comprised primarily of students of low socio-economic students of color that had historically demonstrated a lack of academic success.

At this point in my introspective thinking, even with knowledge of the lack of historical academic and achievement success for the majority of students on my campus and within my district, the level of awareness for the significance the role of the superintendent necessitates in directing student achievement was not acknowledged. It was, however, a combination of contributing factors associated with my internalization and growth both professionally as a school administrator in a district of color and educationally as a graduate student that prompted my realization for the actual responsibility and gravity required from a school superintendent who has expectations for educational equity for all his or her students.

Having unsuspectingly, and I must admit, naively taken a course in theoretical epistemologies, I began in the beginning of the course to struggle with and dismiss the

notion of the possibility of multiple epistemological truths, realities, and perspectives in favor of my own static reality of the superintendency. It was not until my level of epistemological acceptance and awareness invoked a sense of consciousness and reflection in my own thinking did I acknowledge and begin to question my own thinking.

Thus, the development of my own epistemological awareness coupled with my own experiences in a school district of low-income homes and children of color, which did not exemplify high equitable success for all students, prompted my personal research questioning and subsequent investigative queries. One day I may choose to be one of the superintendents who desires to be an effective school leader and having a greater understanding and insight into superintendent perceptions of student inequities in student achievement may play a crucial role in my success and ultimately and most importantly the success of all of my students.

Academic Rationale

I begin the second section of this introductory chapter by providing a brief, broad overview of the superintendency, the superintendent's role in accountability and reform and achievement inequities associated with low-income and children of color, and lastly calls and demands for improvement and the general lack of research in the research topic.

Historical Context of the Superintendency

The position of public school superintendent originated in the mid 1800's and assigned duties were primarily of budgetary management and assisting local school

boards with meeting state reporting requirements. Superintendents generally were expected to define, communicate and monitor the taught curriculum and were generally relegated to perform routine management duties. However, as schools began to transform from one-room schoolhouses to multiple-graded buildings, federal educational reforms necessitated the subsequent evolution of the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent (Trunslow & Coleman, 2005).

As federal and state school reform movements continued during the early 1900's and through the Industrial Revolution, an ever-present progression towards large-scale urbanization greatly affected the primary role and responsibilities of the superintendent (Bjork, 1993). Additionally, as schools also increased in physical size, greater emphasis was placed on effective organizational and management practices and a distinctive, expanding occupational role of responsibilities and duties was formalized for the superintendent.

The continuing importance in the expansion and development of superintendent responsibilities and duties has also been produced by continued and prolific calls for school reform from a multitude of external community sources. Influential citizens, politically charged community members, and politicians heavily influenced the emergence and development of a multifaceted, conflicted role of responsibilities and duties (Trunslow & Coleman, 2005). This conflict from external forces has continually served as a contributing factor for superintendent incongruence between accountability and student performance and has greatly affected "the manner in which superintendents relate to and interact with all facets of leadership" (Trunslow & Coleman, 2005, p. 20).

This incongruence between student performance and accountability led subsequent state and federal education reforms of the 1980's and 1990's and resulted in the extension of instructional leadership and closing of student achievement gaps responsibilities for superintendents. As Cuban (1986) states, "Historically, superintendents have been expected to be well versed in curriculum and instruction" (p. 56) and the traditional role of the superintendent as a curriculum and organizational leader has not been supplanted by growing pressure of accountability reforms but rather a transformative, reprioritization of additional responsibilities and duties emerged.

As these reprioritized duties and responsibilities became evident and undeniable, superintendents no longer could afford to be "first" good managers and organizational leaders. Instructional leadership that focused on student achievement and closed student achievement gaps between all students began to overshadow superintendent's management and administrative duties. Clearly, the political and public expectation for student performance accountability necessitated added instructional leadership capacity in terms of superintendent behaviors and responsibilities, which therefore, has ultimately led to a changing view of superintendent effectiveness and accountability.

School Improvement

Within today's educational paradigm of superintendent effectiveness and accountability, the superintendent as the instructional leader has traditionally maintained the responsibility for guiding and directing the district's efforts in student achievement and improvement. Due to the ubiquitous nature of regulatory sanctions and public scrutiny, educational leaders can no longer afford to wait for "once a year results," as the

call for improvement in student performance begins as a continuous, systematic approach to a paradigm shift in implementation of achievement strategies and improvement efforts.

Consequently, systemic improvement efforts have necessitated meeting federal mandate performance standards, disaggregation of student performance data, and publication of campus and district accountability rankings. These highly visible and publicized rankings have resulted in “labels” of campus performance and produced greater demands by the public for student performance improvement and a focus on all student ethnic and demographic group performances. Direct pressure from parents and other district stakeholders of children of color as well as from the community at large have demanded the same equitable high quality education for all students (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Anthes, 2002; Nelson, McGhee, Meno, & Slater, 2007; Sherman, 2008).

Accordingly, in response to recurring political and societal calls for school improvement, school superintendents as district educational leaders have been compelled under the threat of strict No Child Left Behind, (NCLB) accountability sanctions to focus on achieving higher student performance on state standardized tests. Stated another way, “Next to school finance, the greatest pressure on school superintendents is the pressure to obtain higher performance on high-stakes tests from the schools in their districts (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005, p. 23). Accordingly, it would appear increased scrutiny and continual calls for school improvement have compelled superintendents to encompass a level of acceptance and responsibility for

student achievement and for some superintendents the direct and indirect personification of themselves as effective leaders.

In as much as school improvement is viewed as a component of effective leadership by superintendents, Striefer (1990) contends only when the entire organization focuses its attention and energies on the development and implementation of a comprehensive school improvement plan will increased achievement take place. I pose the question: *What better person to focus and energize an entire school district on school improvement than the district educational leader, the superintendent?* As described by Chand (1988), “Superintendents are responsible for the overall success of the educational programs under their supervision. One way to bring the educational improvement like other improvements is from the top administrators. Superintendents make the difference” (p. 5). If superintendents have the capacity to focus their school districts on school improvement and therefore are positioned to bring about change, then why are so many superintendents (schools) failing to meet minimum achievement standards for all students?

In the absence of a definitive answer regarding persistent failure of superintendents to guide their districts to achieving minimum achievement standards, several research studies involving the concept of institutional theory (Rowan, 1982; Rowan & Miskel, 1999) have suggested that within the past decade, schools have become large scale, educational bureaucracies that have responded to calls for school improvement and educational equity in schooling by placement and categorization of students and staff according to institutional demands for standardization, conformity,

and homogeneity. Superintendents wishing to conform to the political and societal milieu of schooling may in response result to actions that require them to ignore obvious discrepancies and disparities in student achievement in order to maintain an established institutional level of legitimacy while sacrificing efficiency and performance.

By conforming to traditional, expected institutional organizational roles and expectations, superintendents have the potential to ignore obvious student achievement deficiencies and inequities and, therefore, significantly impact the “system’s throughput” toward a vision or goal (Downey, 1960). As a result, superintendent conformity negates “the vision” of increases in student achievement and performance. Consequently, the development of superintendent self-efficacy and subsequent role personification is crucial to the communication and implementation of a vision for equitable student achievement for all students. Otherwise, the visionary statement and belief “all children can learn” simply becomes no more than insignificant rhetoric.

Increased Accountability

Even with most public schools adopting similar global statements of learning affirmations, within the broad, historical contextual arena of education in the United States, legislation, initiatives, and reforms addressing student achievement and equity for all students have fallen short, even in the time span that has been often characterized as the era of educational “accountability.” Major pieces of federal accountability legislative reforms (Elementary and Secondary Act, ESEA; Goals 2000: Educate America Act and No Child Left Behind, NCLB) resulted in continued calls for increased student rigor as well as increased demands for educational achievement equity that were designed to

address the failure of the educational system to successfully educate all children (Linn, 2005).

These reforms were specifically targeted to address educational inequities within targeted groups of children identified as at risk, economically disadvantaged, and of color. These categories of students have traditionally underperformed their White counterparts in many areas of educational achievement in which wide gaps exist between disadvantaged and advantaged students' performance. "Historically, there have been virtually no examples of entire school districts that have been successful educating children of color or children from low-income homes for any period of time" (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001, p. 238). This continual and persistent lack of documented, recurrent, and equitable performance reinforces the traditional failure of federal educational structures and practices to serve children of color and children from low-income homes.

Similarly, within the state legislative framework of education reform, Texas has maintained a 16-year time span (1991-2007) of continuous system accountability that has also focused on addressing educational inequities for students of color and low socio-economic, disadvantaged students. This accountability system also simultaneously implemented an assessment system that disaggregated and reported individual and group student test scores. The public release of performance data in a comprehensive, consistent format, exemplified often known but seldom-acknowledged disparate outcomes between students and student groups (Nelson et al., 2007). Subsequently, the proverbial "cat was out of the bag." No longer could teachers, principals, administrators, school board members as well as the general public dismiss or deny the presence of

inequities within their own educational systems. In many instances, the data revealed, “Test scores for students of color and students living in poverty consistently trailed those of white, middle-class students” (Nelson et al., 2007, p. 704). Consequently, Texas reforms and initiatives resulted in rigorous performance standards and high-stakes testing that highlighted and publicized continuation of significant differences and disparities in performance of students of color, and those of low socio-economic and at-risk status.

Collection and publication of schooling inequities in which data for children of color and children from low-income homes was uniformly calculated, compared, and accessible, did result in greater superintendent participatory involvement and inequity accountability. Reiterating this fact, researchers Murphy, Hallinger, and Peterson (1985) state, “Districts with excellent student achievement have superintendents who are personally involved” (p. 252), subsequently have a direct effect on student achievement and equity. Increased educational accountability for some school superintendents did produce greater personal involvement and recognition for the primary purpose of the job is to improve student achievement for all students.

Superintendents, however, differ considerably with the degree of personal involvement in which varying levels of acceptance, personal effectiveness, and leadership result (Mayo, 1999). This differing involvement by some school superintendents or the general lack thereof to be involved can be viewed to be of paramount importance to understanding their perceptions and interpretations as effective

public school leaders and more importantly assist in the quest for providing a successful and equitable education truly for all students.

Contextual Role of the Effective Superintendent

Although the pursuit to understand and delineate effective educational leadership in public schools has been around since the early beginnings of American education, the role of effective superintendent leadership has remained ignored and neglected (Thomas, 2001). Historically, around the end of the 19th century, concepts of effective educational leadership primarily focused on efficiency and the expansion of policymaking and restructuring (Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Even through the 21st century, educational issues, reforms, programs and curriculum guided the milieu of efforts and discourse away from the focus on the superintendency and toward school principals as instructional leaders (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Levine, 1991; Thomas, 2001). Griffin and Chance (1994) suggest there is a considerable amount of research regarding the position of the principal as an effective instructional leader and a number of studies suggest the principalship has even dominated effective school research findings (Bridges, 1982; Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979, Levine 1991). However, the research is virtually void of studies specifically focusing on the superintendent's role and influence on American education.

According to Thomas (2001), "Contemporary research rarely focuses on examining the effectiveness of educational leadership at the district level" (p. 1). Other researchers such as Griffin and Chance (1994) and Bjork (1993) also contend research-based literature is void on the superintendent's influence on effectiveness in America

education. With virtually little research available dealing specifically with the linkage between superintendent effectiveness and the persistent lack of student achievement with low-income and students of color, additional information regarding their perceptions of their personal effectiveness in an era of high-stakes accountability is needed.

Development of Superintendent Self-Efficacy

With current research and studies focusing on “campus level” administrators and their practices, the effective leadership role of superintendents at the “district level,” has been heightened by the public’s demand for equitable student performance and rising expectations for all student groups. Embedded within the premise of expectations and explanations for the persistent failure of children of color, and children from low-income homes is the premise of a deficit-thinking paradigm that posits that students identified as poor, minority, or “at-risk” are responsible and inevitably to blame for their own failure in school and academic endeavors (Valencia, 1997). The “failure” lies externally with the students, their families, their attitudes, and so on rather than internally with educational structures, practices, and assumptions within the educational system. It is within this context of introspective examination of educational assessment and accountability that Skrla and Scheurich (2001) reported a significant displacement of deficit thinking by district superintendents led to improved and equitable school success by students of color and students of low socio-economic status. Their findings also suggested as a result of the Texas high-stakes accountability system, successful superintendents were able to move their districts forward toward more equitable ideals as a result of their specific re-evaluation of their own deficit-oriented views.

Superintendent re-evaluations produced focused, targeted intervention in both practice and purpose for all stakeholders within their districts, which highlighted a shifting equity for improvement and academic success for all students.

More specifically, re-evaluation of each superintendent's own deficit-oriented thinking resulted in their ability to play a critical role in leading the development, conversion, and subsequent improvement in equitable academic achievement for all students, regardless of color or socio-economic status. As further concluded in the Skrla and Scheurich (2001) study, superintendents' examination of their own intrinsic and extrinsic deficit leadership practices, programs, and policies in each district guided the restructuring and reshaping efforts within each district and subsequently increased student achievement.

Consequently, understanding constructed perceived superintendent self-efficacy would be a crucial factor for increased academic performance in districts with low and varying levels of student achievement. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) affirmed that self-efficacy is a fundamental relationship for school improvement and suggested a link that is "significantly related to district leadership and other organization conditions... It is a belief about ability, not actual ability" (p. 497). In other words, "People's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based on more what they believe than on what is objectively true" (Bandura, 1997, p. 2). Bandura (1997) and Prussia, Anderson, and Manz (1998) also underscore the distinction between perceptual and actual ability by affirming that one's individual perception (self-efficacy) of his/her ability is a critical

component, (none more vital or influential) that may serve to contribute to organizational outcomes, such as increased attendance and academic achievement.

Hence, no longer is the outwardly (actual) perception of how great an organizer a superintendent is, or how well a superintendent can manage a district, a determinate factor of superintendent success or primary effectiveness. Rather, it is the superintendent's ability to confront and respond to his/her own introspective (perceptual) thinking in order to maximize student achievement and thereby transform their districts into high-achieving, equitable institutions of learning that have emerged. As such, understanding constructed superintendent self-efficacy and its influence on instructional leadership would be a crucial factor for increased effective leadership in districts with varying levels of student performance. Yet, a thorough review of the research literature is virtually void on this topic; therefore, additional exploratory research is needed on the manner in which it is confronted, constructed, and assessed in response to varying levels of student performance.

Statement of Problem

These pivotal findings have led this researcher to question: How could superintendents with reported years of poor student achievement performance for children of color, continue to declare they are effective educational and instructional leaders? What's up with that? What's their story? What is going through their minds? How can these superintendents believe and maintain the assertion they are effective educational leaders when year-after-year, large numbers of students of color and low socio-economic wealth are failing to meet accountability standards, and "perform at or

near the bottom of virtually every measurement of educational attainment” (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001, p. 236).

Are superintendent actions or the lack thereof a direct result of homogeneity conformity to their notion or adherence to specific ideals on education and schooling? Is it possible superintendents within the Texas accountability system are maintaining a “status quo” approach to equitable schooling for all students as a direct result of a failure to examine deficit-thinking practices and policies in their own thinking and beliefs? The research discourse is virtually silent on how development of self-efficacy by a superintendent is constructed in districts that have varying levels of student performance. Therefore, having a greater understanding of the link between superintendent self-efficacy and student achievement has the potential to be a significant factor in the success and effectiveness for all superintendents.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to investigate public school superintendent self-efficacy and its perceived influence on instructional leadership in districts with persistent student achievement inequities for economically disadvantaged and students of color.

Research Questions

The following research questions will address the problem under study:

1. How do superintendents in school districts in which children of color and children from low-income homes persistently under-perform perceive their effectiveness in the area of instructional leadership?
2. What are superintendents' perceptions about how their instructional leadership beliefs are influenced by the context of federal and state accountability in which they work?

Definition of Key Terms

Deficit thinking “posits that students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies, such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations, or shortcomings socially linked to the youngster – such as familial deficits and dysfunctions” (Valencia, 1997, p. xi).

Economically disadvantaged student group is composed of students identified as eligible for free and reduced lunches as identified by governmental income eligibility guidelines and thresholds as determined by family size.

Instructional leadership is defined within this study as the central focus of actions and activities that influence teachers' behaviors whereby impacting student growth, performance, and achievement (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999).

Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their own capacity to generate selected levels of performance or effects (Bandura, 1997).

Self-efficacy is defined as the “belief in one's own ability” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008, p. 497).

Student achievement within the context of this study is that which is measured on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test and reported on the annual Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS).

Methods

This study was framed in a critical interpretivist epistemological framework that endeavors to produce a paradigm that seeks interpretative understandings of actions and behaviors through a “praxis” construction of knowledge. According to Merriam (1991), the critical interpretivist paradigm embraces construction of knowledge with understanding the context, meaning, and action of deprived, oppressed, and underprivileged people’s experiences.

The critical epistemological approach seeks out to understand and explain what is happening and then upon critical reflection of the experiences constructs knowledge on the basic assumption “the way people behave in practice and the way they understand themselves to be acting” (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982, p. 9) may be distorted. As a thorough understanding of self-conscious engagement or dialogue continues in the critical paradigm, construction of knowledge becomes emancipatory and enlightening and with the ultimate purpose in mind brings about change.

Employing a traditional qualitative constructivist research approach within a critical interpretivist framework, this study utilized several data-gathering strategies that included semi-structured interviews, researcher observations, and field notes (Merriam, 1998). Semi-structured interviews were conducted using pre-established questions that

served as a guide in order to provide a level of dialogue consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Researcher observations and field notes were taken during each interview as part of the data collection process. As a critical piece of inquiry, all participant names and school districts were referenced anonymously in order to avoid identification with any individual or school district.

Participant Selection

Participants for this study were selected using a purposive sampling (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993) procedure that maximizes the distinctiveness of emerging themes associated with both related and cultural standards of an observed characteristic. In the case of this research study, participants (three district superintendents) were selected from a list of Texas public school districts that have one or more campuses rated unacceptable, low-performing as identified on the 2007-2008 Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report of student performance.

The researcher chose the first superintendent to contact for study inclusion based on the researcher's knowledge of the identified district having historically (greater than five years) one or more campuses rated as unacceptable, low-performing, and a high percentage of students of color and children from low-income homes that typically have underperformed their White peers on standardized measures of academic performance.

At the conclusion of the first interview, study participant (participant #1) was asked to suggest a second superintendent (participant #2) for study inclusion and at the conclusion of the second interview, participant #2 suggested the third superintendent

(participant #3) to include in the study. Nomination of superintendents for study inclusion by participant superintendent references the acknowledgement of the scope of questioning, discourses, and discussions and the desire for inclusion of superintendents with highly diverse student populations. Nomination of study participants is also predicated on the belief that study participants believe nominated superintendents are doing a “good job” as effective instructional leaders within their districts.

Data Analysis

The basic design of this study incorporated a qualitative interview data collection methodology as outlined as a systematic, straightforward approach to apply concepts to specific inquiry practices. Use of qualitative data analysis methodology also provides the best means for specifically identifying the socially constructed reality of superintendents and therefore provides a greater mechanism for understanding and comprehending the “lived experience” (Merriam, 1998). Specifically, the identification of perceptions, opinions, and beliefs effecting superintendent effectiveness is uncovered by the actual interview responses generated during participant interviews.

Individual, taped interviews were conducted with each of the research participants. Taped interviews were later transcribed and using a constant comparative method of data analysis, categories and coding of themes and topics were completed. Subsequent data analysis followed to identify collected major individual and group thematic data from the interviews. Interpretative analysis by the researcher was then applied to the major thematic categories identified and used in the final development of research findings and conclusions.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Two methods were utilized to enhance both trustworthiness and credibility. The process of triangulation according to Merriam (1998), involves the method of using “multiple sources of data or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings” to provide validity to the study. Information coming from coding and categorization of the data were cross-referenced with available research literature and observer/field notes to establish an assessment of consistency or increased confidence in the dependability of the data. A level of study credibility was then established reinforcing reliability as well as internal validity.

Peer examinations or the practice of allowing colleagues to comment on constructed data categorizations, interpretations, and conclusions was completed with all research participants. The purpose of peer examinations is to provide an opportunity to verify findings and results from the study with the constructed reality of collected information and data. Two individuals with knowledge of the public school superintendency and the Texas accountability system were solicited to assist in the analysis, categorization, and subsequent discussion of findings and conclusions.

Significance of Study

This study contributes to the limited body of research knowledge that focuses on the perceptions of school superintendents’ effectiveness in persistent low-achieving public school districts with primarily students of color. As public school districts strive to “educate all children” and truly become exemplars of educational success for all students, the perceptions of these superintendents will assist us in the understanding of

how superintendents influence the lack of development of high-achieving schools through their own perceptions of the roles and responsibilities as effective leaders.

These perceptions have additional implications for eliminating racial and low socio-economic achievement inequities throughout our public educational system and thus produce truly high and equitable schooling for all. This study also serves to establish a contextual significance between today's high-stakes accountability system and the understanding of perceptive attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of superintendents who serve as educational leaders within districts that educate primarily students of color and exhibit low-student achievement.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Leadership ability is the lid that determines a person's level of effectiveness. The lower an individual's ability to lead, the lower the lid on his potential. The higher the leadership, the greater the effectiveness. Your leadership ability—for better or for worse—always determines your effectiveness and the potential impact of your organization. (Maxwell, 2002)

Understanding superintendent self-efficacy within the current era of educational accountability is predicated on a multitude of factors associated with improving student achievement, school improvement, and educational equity. With the inclusion of additional contextual factors associated with state and federally mandated performance assessments, a resultant puzzling and bewildering picture of superintendent effectiveness has emerged.

To piece together fully a clear picture of superintendent self-efficacy as it has evolved and currently exists in the American public school system, a brief summarization of relevant academic literature is presented in this subsequent chapter. It must be noted that a great deal of academic literature can be found with regard to understanding superintendent social characteristics, performance duties, and typical career tracks; however, literature research is scarce with respect to understanding superintendent self-efficacy as it exists in today's "high-stakes" era of educational accountability. As Meyer and Rowan (1975) point out, the "structures" of the American education system are widely acknowledged; yet, "today new conditions and challenges exist within the superintendency that call for greater understanding and rethinking of educational leadership" (p. 286). Although the academic literature on the subject is

sparse, a variety of associated topics can be directly correlated to the topic of this research. A selected summary of the most relevant topics: the historical context of the superintendency, contextual role of the superintendent, the development of superintendent self-efficacy, and the instructional effectiveness of the superintendent are presented in this chapter.

History of Superintendency

In order to expand on the brief introduction of the history of the American superintendency that was introduced in Chapter I, a more thorough review can be accomplished by outlining the evolutionary progression of changes, phases, and roles incorporated since its inception in the early 1800's. As Candoli (1995) describes this process:

It is possible to trace the evolution of the position, starting with the notion of the superintendent as the master teacher and the leader of the students and teachers of a school system. In the next phase, the superintendent acts as the manager of the school system, held accountable by the board for all of the activities of the system. The progression moves forward toward the conception of the superintendent as the chief executive officer of the school organization. Finally, we arrive at the current notion of the superintendent as responsible for developing and implementing a variety of different models to respond to the many publics that make up the modern school system. (p. 339)

The “evolutionary progression” of the superintendency as outlined by Candoli (1995) creates a model for tracing and constructing a contextual history of the position. The use of an evolutionary model also allows for the incorporation of a more descriptive narrative and can thus facilitate the construction of an expanded historical context delineated by expanded duties, roles, and responsibilities that more accurately reflects the various developmental changes in the position over time.

Creation and Role of State Superintendents

Within the American public education system, the evolutionary path of the newly emerging superintendency can be traced to initial responses from state legislatures that in the early 1800's created local communities of education. The primary purpose of these local communities of education was to provide expenditure oversight of state funds. However, as state school systems became larger and complex, these communities of education became over-burdened with the task of managing the system's finances.

Subsequently, these educational communities hired individuals with business knowledge and accounting skills to manage the finances. These individuals held the official positions of state superintendents. As Houston (2007) points out, these individuals were "largely bureaucrats carrying out state laws, collecting data, and accounting for the money" (p. 28). The initial appointment in 1812 of a paid state accounting officer in New York created the first state superintendent (Houston, 2007). It is important to note that state superintendents managed the accounting functions and expenditures for many school systems for decades, until more students sought formal education and increased the size of local school districts, necessitating the need for greater operational control.

Creation and Role of District Superintendents

Two events in particular are credited with increasing the size of local school districts and thus creating a single individual district superintendent to manage the district affairs. The first event was a landmark legal decision in which the Michigan Supreme Court in 1874 ruled that local school boards had the right to tax local property

owners to support elementary and secondary education. The second event was the invention of the motorized vehicle that allowed for increased mobility; consolidation of small, rural school districts into larger, comprehensive districts; and the ability to adequately provide servicing of individuals of diverse needs in educational and vocational programs to meet a growing economic and industrial base (Candoli, 1995).

Consequently, the position of district superintendent originated from the development and movement from an agrarian society and the progression toward larger urbanization of cities and towns. Within the United States, cities and towns grew in population and so did subsequent schools. As student enrollments increased, lay community board members could no longer continue to provide the level of direction and supervision needed (Candoli, 1995). As a result, the superintendency “was borne of the school board’s inability to manage burgeoning enrollment in city schools” (Berg & Barnett, 1998; Bredeson & Johansson, 1998). Accordingly, as a result of larger student populations and the inability to adequately oversee operations, local school boards hired district school superintendents primarily to manage the business and operational aspects of the school system. From the first appointment of a superintendent of common schools on June 9, 1837 in Buffalo, New York, to the first appointment of superintendent of public schools in Louisville, Kentucky, on July 31, 1837, school superintendents were respected individuals in their communities whose role was to make decisions regarding the school system in their care (Candoli, 1995).

Superintendent as Caretaker and School Master

As district school superintendents during the mid-1800's, these trusted individuals also held many other occupations. They often shifted between their roles as superintendents and other influential roles such as clergy, lawyers, and politicians. Specific position responsibilities as well as actual duties were ill defined, and in the absence of any formal job description, superintendents relied on individual school board expectations and decisions and the drive and qualities of the both elected and non-elected school officials (Candoli, 1995; Tyack, 1976) for guidance. Generally, during this early "golden era," superintendent duties and responsibilities, although informally defined, primarily included overseeing finances, buildings and daily operations, and while doing so gained, the community's trust as "custodians of the nation's future" (Houston, 2007).

As "caretakers" of educational democracy, superintendents of schools were trusted to provide both a moral and egalitarian role model for both teachers and students alike. Tyack (1976), Stanford professor and history educator asserts, "leadership in public education was often seen as a *calling* similar to that of church missionary" (p. 250). The ability and assumed authority of a superintendent to lead, provided a level of conformity, acceptance, and optimism for lay individuals during this time period. By "evangelizing" educational programs and practices, superintendents generally derived leadership capacity. This championing and avid support for a free and appropriate public education was thought to be a crucial component for the expansion and evolution of the district superintendency. Acknowledging this factor, superintendent designation as

schoolmaster, a teacher of teachers type of categorization (Candoli, 1995; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Trunslow & Coleman, 2005) resulted from these actions and subsequently has dominated public school administration.

Superintendent as Chief Executive Organizational Officer

It was not until the end of the 19th century, however, that the label of schoolmaster was lifted. Primarily, as a result of an evolutionary shift in responsibilities away from local school board decision-making and much sought after increases in professional autonomy, superintendents were generally allowed to make day-to-day decisions with little oversight from their boards of education. A general transitional shift from a rural to industrialized society had necessitated an evolutionary change, a transitional shift towards a managerial, chief executive type of position for superintendents (Callahan, 1962; Candoli, 1995; Griffiths, 1966). Illustrating this new chief executive philosophy of managerial leadership, Payne, the first professor of education wrote:

If there is to be a plan, someone must devise it, while others must execute it. As members of the human body execute the behests of the supreme intelligence, so in human society the many must follow the directions of the few...The assignment of the course of study, the examination of the pupils, their oversight and correction, the oversight of teachers, the compilation of records—these are some of the items on which depend; the success of the system, and which require the attention of a single head. (pp. 13, 17)

As managers, superintendents had the operational authority to make all of the decisions within the organization and were held responsible by the local school board. As the “expert” manager, superintendents during the era of managerial leadership were characterized by corollaries to current trends under study of society at the time involving

the study of organizational and management theory. Scientific management, one movement within the era of management and organizational theory, played a crucial role in the development of the superintendency.

Superintendent as Scientific Manager

This critical role is well defined by the principles of scientific management described by the father of scientific management, Frederick Taylor. In his pivotal paper, Taylor (1911) delineated guiding suitability and appropriateness for maximization of effectiveness across all disciplines utilizing the tenets of adherence to protocol and procedures of efficiency and control (Bjork, 1993; Brooks & Miles, 2006). Adherence to these precepts of management demanded the role of “administrative chiefs” in education to be both administrative and instructional leaders that competed often with the conflicting role of politician (Cuban, 1988).

Integration of all three roles ultimately produced what Cuban (1988) referred to as a “tripartite” function of leadership. Integration of these roles within the era of scientific management produced and promulgated the role of the superintendent towards establishment of industrial models of businesses with overarching concern for efficiency and effectiveness.

Describing a similar critical role involving adherence to scientific management principles, Griffiths (1966) also described the development of the superintendency during this period as one in which centralization and decision-making of administrative functions according to established protocols and procedures were of paramount significance. As a basic guideline, administrative adherence leads the organization to

greater efficiency. These principles and protocols focused on the guiding concern for the school superintendent to be the principal decision-maker, with lesser control and governance from local boards of education producing greater efficiency and effectiveness.

Superintendent as Policymaker

Ultimately, superintendent conformity to the scientific movement began to wane as a result of writings and research that highlighted the significance, value and importance of the social and human aspects regarding performance and efficiency. Redirected efforts focused on the “humanistic” concern and contribution for individual actions and behaviors that led to increased productivity and effectiveness. During this period, the role of superintendent as suggested by Newlon (1934) was that of educational policy developer and implementer, a more encompassing role than merely chief authority or decision-maker. Not surprising, according to Candoli (1995) “the human relations or social systems theory provided a balance for the scientific or classical theory of administration” (p. 338).

As a dominant form of organizational theory, the “balanced” role of the superintendent was maintained as a dominant force in the development of the superintendency. As Houston (2007) points out, superintendents have continually, for decades, provided the needed unifying balance to oversee the business of schools, that is management of finances, facilities, and operations (Houston, 2007). However, as a result of the Great Depression in 1930 and unfulfilled promises of a New Deal for the American people, public regard for balanced administrative business management

philosophies heightened criticism and disapproval for district superintendents (Button, 1966). During this period, businessmen were not highly thought of, well-regarded individuals. The proverbial pendulum of public favor had swung away from economy and efficiency management philosophies and was replaced with demands for district leadership that reinforced social policies.

Superintendent as Democratic Champion

With calls and demands for increased “American values, “as a result of a post World War I society, an expectation was maintained that school leaders inspire an understanding and appreciative level of engagement in the democratic system. After all, one primary purpose of schooling was to promote an educational system that supported democratically shared decision-making involving all shareholders (Button, 1966; Spaulding, 1954). Kefauver (as cited in Button, 1966) reiterates this period of collective decision-making in school leadership:

Actual leadership, as judged by the contribution made or the solution arrived at, may come from a classroom teacher, a parent, or the administrator. The role of the administrator may or may not involve the introduction of the idea finally accepted. In many situations, the administrator’s leadership role will be that of encouraging others to participate effectively. (p. 221)

With a realization that the purpose of schooling was to accommodate and adhere to shared decision-making and democratic principles, superintendents were expected to involve and encourage others to participate in the decision-making process, suggesting schools would no longer require the administrative justification for economy and efficiency assurances provided by school superintendents. The school administrator was left in a position of reduced authority and regard (Button, 1966).

Accompanying reduced power and control alterations, societal and culture criticisms initiated by social, gender, and disability inequities continued to seriously weaken the position and role of the superintendent. Growing criticism of public education spurred responsibility and blame for educational deficits and injustices at the school superintendent. Superintendents became district “scapegoats” for educational deficiencies (Houston, 2007).

In an effort to centralize and insulate the school system from the critical and harmful community influences and political corruption, reformers turned to removing the “politics” of education from the school system by the vesting of power into small boards of men that in turn would convey power and responsibility over to the school superintendent. Utilizing an adapted centralized corporate model of reform that encompassed scientific management philosophies and orderly hierarchical bureaucracies, these reform efforts resulted in the restoration of legitimacy and professionalism within the superintendency (Alsbury, 2007; Button, 1966; Tyack, 1976).

Restoration of superintendent authority and status resulted in reinforcement for corroborative legal and organizational power, which produced the current, persistent conventional management practices that have continued throughout subsequent wars and economic upheavals. Restored superintendent authority practices emphasized greater significance and importance for collective managerial decisions and actions, which further led to expansion of the role and responsibilities of the superintendent, even within increasingly complex educational settings and environments (Bjork & Lindle 2001).

Superintendent as Social Advocate

Boyan (1988) similarly asserts that as reforms in education were modified and redefined, increased significance for the redefinition of superintendent powers and duties emerged in response to new, complex, and multifaceted expectations to deal with issues associated with political and societal tensions occurring during the last 35 years of the 20th century. Major shifts in expectations for both schools and school leaders occurred during this time period in which access, opportunity, and accountability for all students drove the educational milieu of complex reform efforts in which school superintendents were expected to balance racial, social, and institutional equilibriums (Brooks & Miles, 2006; Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

Although arguably, the goal of access and opportunity for all students had been achieved by the end of the 20th century, progress towards accountability regarding high achievement equity for all students was not reached. Even with calls for educational reforms from reports (A Nation at Risk, and Goals 2000: Educate America Act) published during this time period, progress towards accountability equity was slow and deficient. Clearly, a focused need for education reforms involving increased standards and higher expectations of excellence was needed (Houston, 2007) and resulted in greater demands for effective leadership at the district level (Ashbaugh, 2000; Petersen & Young, 2004).

Superintendents' Instructional Leadership

Within the arena of instructional leadership, much of the research has been dominated with that of the primary role and the responsibility of the school principal,

and the instructional leadership role of superintendents has largely been disregarded (Bjork 1993). More recently, research has focused on equity and access reforms for all students, and there has been renewed interest in the significance of the superintendent as the district instructional leader. Much of the expectation with regard to instructional leadership within a district is directly attributable to the role and level of involvement that is assumed by a school superintendent (Grogan, 2000).

Several studies have indicated that superintendents maintain the most practical position in the organization to support instructional improvements (Hord, 1993) and become “teachers of teachers,” guiding their districts through organizational change and accountability (Hall & Hord, 2001; Johnson, 1996). Houston (2007) reiterates, that in today’s highly complex world of educational accountability and high-stakes testing, superintendents must be “champions of curriculum and masters of teaching and learning” and “respond effectively...while staying focused on the crucial mission of improving student learning” (p. 4).

It is improving student learning through instructional leadership that superintendents within the organizational hierarchy can influence and direct their districts (Peterson, 1984; Thomas, 1988). Several researchers have highlighted the relationship between superintendent instructional leadership and student achievement. Bridges (1982) and Cuban (1984) found academic success can be directly attributed to the superintendent’s influence on instructional leadership and subsequently the success and/or failure of a school. Bjork (1993) points out, success or failure of a public school

is “directly linked to the influence of the district superintendent, particularly those who maintain a high level of involvement in instructional programs (p. 249).

Murphy et al. (1985) declare, “districts with excellent student achievement have superintendents who are personally involved” (p. 79) with their districts’ curriculum and instructional programs. Archer noted (as cited by Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007), student success and increases in student achievement are more likely to happen within districts that had supportive, participatory, and assertive superintendents shaping instruction. Without a doubt, all of these studies underscore the importance of superintendent instructional leadership capacity as a critical component for increasing student achievement.

This question arises in light of this research. *If personal involvement by superintendents in curriculum and instructional programs produces increases in student learning and performance, then why are not more superintendents more involved in the development, implementation, and monitoring of such programs?* Several studies (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Bjork, 1993; Candoli, 1995; Grogan, 2000) suggest focus on other roles within the position, such as organizational manager, policymaker, and political negotiator have dominated superintendents’ agendas. These assumed roles reflect direct and/or indirect realities of a challenging and conflicting position that has resulted in time and energy obstacles to instructional leadership that daily overload the average superintendent (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Glass et al., 2000).

Others (Berg & Barnett, 1998; Cohn, 2005; Petersen & Young, 2005) suggest the challenges and the conditions of the superintendency have produced an intermittent (at

best) focus on instructional leadership and that until an emphasis on student achievement among diverse student populations was revealed and reported by accountability systems and legislative mandates, superintendents engaged themselves in other participatory and supervisory roles. Sherman (2008) advocates little evidence is found to support superintendents were working to improve achievement inequities prior to NCLB passage.

More importantly, the sparcity or total lack of instructional leadership by school superintendents contributed to and resulted in renewed and redefined expectations for participatory school improvement within a redefining of the contextual role of the superintendent. It is within this perspective that current superintendents have identified instructional leadership as a needed skill for future school superintendents to develop and possess (Myers, 1992).

In fact, the contemporary superintendent guidelines of the American Association of School Administrators (Department of Education, 2000) maintain that superintendents must serve their districts in curriculum planning and development and in instructional management. They are expected more than ever before to be aware of the achievement of all groups of students as measured by standardized tests. (Sherman, 2008 p. 678)

For many superintendents, the role of instructional leader has not been assumed even when practicing superintendents rank curriculum and instruction as top priorities (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Myers, 1992). Superintendents in spite of recognizing the importance of their direct involvement in curriculum and instruction on student achievement actually spend little time in these areas (Bredeson & Johansson, 1998). What is clear is that instructional leadership capacity is acknowledged to be integrally

necessary within the accepted role and responsibility of school superintendents; but superintendents have historically and largely ignored these duties (Bjork, 1993).

To what extent then is superintendent instructional leadership the critical link to school improvement? Within the broad boundaries of district leadership responsibilities, Waters and Marzano (2007) found the general effect of superintendent leadership to be highly correlated to student achievement. More specifically, Waters and Marzano, (2007) identified five district-level responsibilities involving the role of the superintendent who produced a statistically significant ($p = .05$) correlation between leadership and student academic achievement:

- The goal-setting process;
- Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction;
- Board alignment with and support of district goals;
- Monitor progress on goals for achievement and instruction; and
- Use of resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction. (p. 15)

Clearly, the majority of focus of these responsibilities for superintendents is on district level instructional leadership; and given their position within the organization, superintendents can foster the crucial organizational relationships to promote and support instructional and achievement improvement (Grogan & Sherman, 2005; Petersen, 2002). Waters and Marzano (2007) further support and assert:

The superintendent who implements inclusive goal-setting processes that result in board-adopted non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, who assures that schools align their use of district resources for professional development goals, and who monitors and evaluates progress towards goal achievement is fulfilling multiple responsibilities correlated with high levels of achievement. (p. 15)

As Leithwood and Jantzi (2008), Murphy et al. (1985), and Musella and Leithwood (1988) similarly point out, successful instructional leadership is linked to the ability of district superintendents to communicate and influence the creation of goals and objectives in the promotion of student performance and achievement. Recognizing that superintendents single-handedly cannot produce increases and equitable student achievement in their districts, they, however, serve as key individuals, who are expected to demonstrate instructional leadership competency and proficiency (Bjork, 1993; Bjork & Kowalski, 2005).

The role the school superintendent plays within the arena of instructional leadership is more important today than ever before (Gulek, 2003). “District administrators must have an increased philosophical and technical expertise in curriculum scope, sequence, and alignment” ultimately moving “the role of superintendent from the sidelines to the front of the class” (Petersen & Barnett, 2005, p. 120). Yet, even with a general increase in instructional leadership expectations and competencies, some superintendents maintain minimum knowledge perspectives regarding student achievement in their districts and do little to improve them (Sherman, 2008).

Superintendent Self-Efficacy

Acknowledging evidence exists regarding the connection and contribution between various levels of school, district, and state leadership and the effects on student learning outcomes, Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) maintain that understanding individual and collective efficacy are crucial influences that also link significantly within the broad

context of improving school and student achievement results. The superintendency as a profession is immensely involved in the management of perception, whether “held by board members, staff, the public or by the superintendent” (Nestor-Baker & Hoy, 2001, p. 106).

Specifically, the ability of superintendents to maintain their perceptions and beliefs in their own capacity to achieve a goal is the “the key cognitive variable regulating leader functioning in a dynamic environment” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008, p. 497). The ability of school superintendents to examine their own intrinsic leadership beliefs and practices and subsequently direct their district efforts is a key component of successful school improvement endeavors. According to Wills and Peterson (1995), the manner in which superintendents examine, focus, and make sense of “their” world consequently directs their reform efforts in their districts.

Going beyond the responsive mode of translating good educational practices into reality, superintendents must evaluate their own personal preferences and deficits and subsequently exert their influence to improve educational outcomes for all students (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). What is clear is that superintendents “must direct and implement instructional strategies that will address the needs of those students who have been less well served by past policies and practices, many of whom are still currently being underserved” (Sherman, 2008, p. 678).

While acknowledging the abundance of research regarding positive efficacy beliefs on teachers and school principals (Dimmock & Hattie, 1996; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2000; Hillman, 1983; Imants, & DeBrabander, 1996; Lyons & Murphy,

1994), little academic scholarship is found regarding efficacy beliefs of district leaders, (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008), specifically, school superintendents.

Displacement of Deficit Thinking

Garcia and Guerra (2004) further suggest that school improvement efforts subsequently fail “because of educators’ unwillingness to examine the root causes of underachievement and failure among students from low-income and racially or ethnically diverse backgrounds because of their tendency to locate the problem within students, families and communities” (p. 1). Specifically, as a result of educators’ deficit views regarding the abilities of low-income students of color, school improvement efforts fail as a result of no fault of the educator but rather the lack of parental support that has negated any values or beliefs for acquiring the appropriate skills and knowledge from the educational system.

These educators believe non-interested and disengaged parents are the reason for their own children’s academic failure; and because of reluctance to look at themselves as part of the problem, educators fail to look at the educational organization, its practices, and structures for possible answers. The fault lies significantly with the attitudes, beliefs, and views of the students and parents (Valencia, 1997; Valencia & Black, 2002).

Petersen (1998) maintains expectations are clear and “few would argue that the district superintendent has a legal as well as moral responsibility to see that students and schools achieve as high a standard of performance as possible” (p. 3). In addition to legal and moral expectations, instructional leadership expectations for the superintendent have also changed as a result of state and federal mandates and greater accountability for all

students and student groups through implementation of student standardized testing (Sherman, 2008).

Given these reasons, it is important for superintendents to understand the complexity of deficit thinking by examining their own intrinsic thinking as well as their teacher expectations of low achievement for students of color and from low-income homes. This examination is crucial to moving their districts forward in equity ideals and achieving equitable student achievement (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).

Contextual Role of Superintendent

Thomas (2001) stresses that greater emphasis must be placed on the contextual role superintendents convey (i.e., instructional leader, social activist) if important changes such as performance outcomes in their districts are to occur. Superintendents seeking to improve district performance must assume “individual responsibility for instructional leadership and allocate the necessary district resources to increase student achievement outcomes (Edwards, 2007).

Kowalski (1999) and Sherman (2008) suggest to attain equitable student achievement, superintendents must provide “visions of change” and serve as the primary catalyst for change that addresses achievement gap deficiencies for all students. Through superintendent intervention, Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008) say that “changes in maintaining an equity focus influences changes in instructional leadership, which, in turn influences subsequent actions to maintain an equity focus, reorient the organization, or establish policy coherence” (p. 340).

As agents of change, superintendents are influential in increasing student academic performance in high poverty, ethnically diverse public schools.

Superintendents can accomplish increased academic performance by altering norms and customs that are capable of reshaping the culture and expectations within a district (Patton, 1999). However, until superintendents can truly recognize and confront the beliefs and values of individual and group cultures within their organization, they are not likely to be successful in restructuring school improvement endeavors (Trimble, 1996).

Confrontational introspection of values and beliefs suggests that superintendents face the realization that persistent and enduring “normalization” occurs in education to perpetuate social injustices that systemic reform initiatives, such as NCLB try to eliminate. To complicate the issue, educators like many others in society, have come to view injustices in schools as normal, expected, and irreversible (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Larson and Murtadha (2002) and Bjork and Kowalski (2005) maintain superintendents must develop the appropriate theoretical and strategic framework with which to address injustices they encounter as they ultimately have the responsibility for educating all children. “If not them, whom?” (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005, p. 5)

Inconsistent with an increased effort toward implementation of a framework of social action and intervention, research has found some superintendents have targeted achievement for all groups of students (omitting targeted populations of students, i.e., students of color and low-income), which have given continued advantage to some students and maintained disadvantage to others (Sherman, 2008). While NCLB legislation has emphasized an increased awareness for achievement gaps and inequitable

student performance, it has not facilitated prescriptive practices associated with redesigning specific leadership behaviors or outcomes that eliminate inequalities for any marginalized populations.

Consequently, it may be beneficial for superintendents to gain an increased understanding of the contextual role required for redress by focusing on the interaction and influence organizational behaviors and practices have within an organization. Clearly, a greater emphasis and need for extension and expansion of understanding for the complex, contextual role superintendents assume necessitates additional research on the influence and development of instructional leadership expectations and behavioral practices (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007).

Superintendent Accountability

It is this restructuring and continued development of leadership behaviors, practices, and expectations for equitable academic performance by superintendents that has the potential for substantial change in student equity and accountability within the school culture. It may very well be the deciding factor for student success and promotion of equitable academic achievement for all students regardless of color or socio-economic status (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Superintendent influence has the potential to elevate staff standards and aspirations that highlight the relationship between district goals and social and moral purposes, i.e., the belief that all students can learn (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Superintendents who employ instructional leadership and influence within their district can have a significant and direct effect on student achievement by planning, supervising,

supporting and monitoring school and student progress (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Musella and Leithwood (1988) point out the potential for chief education officers (superintendents) to focus on these factors or practices may be indirect but nonetheless powerful. Moreover, these individuals may be the only ones posed to alter and redesign school systems and thus improve school effectiveness.

Certainly, who in a school district would be better able to exert influence and promote high expectations for academic performance and equity for all students than the school superintendent? Although instructional leadership capacity is not always assumed or developed by all school superintendents, Pitner and Ogawa (1981) found that “superintendents, themselves, believe they are ultimately accountable” (p. 63). Accepting personal responsibility and accountability for instructional leadership by a superintendent, produces a greater commitment and likelihood of achievement of organizational goals. Petersen (1998) makes the case that superintendent deferral or relegation of their instructional leadership on the technical core in turn fuels a lack of consensus and commitment to the organization’s mission and does not advance the organization in achievement of its long term goals. As Leithwood (1995) suggests,

the more removed leadership is from centralized goals the longer the chains of extraneous variables become linking practices with achievement. Consequently, academic achievement may suffer due to the lack of organizational focus by the chief operating officer. (p. 4)

The ability of superintendents to accept accountability for improving achievement and advancing equity for all students is crucial for district improvement efforts, which are directed towards eliminating achievement gaps for children of color and children from low-income homes (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000). Not all school superintendents

chose to become leaders striving for educational equity within their districts nor do they all address systemic biases regarding the treatment and dismal academic performance by children of color (Scheurich & Skrla, 2001). Historically, superintendents could simply adopt a “do nothing approach” and largely ignore performance inequities for children identified as at risk, economically disadvantaged, and of color until educational reforms mandated a system of assessment and accountability.

Through the use of an assessment and accountability system, individual student performance data as well as aggregated group (i.e., ethnicity, at-risk, economically disadvantaged) data were compiled, reported, and publicly released. Scheurich and Skrla (2001) maintain the accountability system played a significant role in prompting “district leaders, the media, community leaders, businesspeople, parents, and others to pay attention to how poorly many children – but particularly children of color and children from low-income families – were being educated” (p. 325). Increased attention produced by the accountability system did lend itself to highlighting the need for closer examinations for meeting the academic needs of children of color and children from low-income families.

Superintendents as leaders of the “whole” system can help bridge achievement gaps, reduce barriers preventing achievement and through increased and expanded attention to educating all students can steer the organization to towards real, sustainable educational improvement (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005). Superintendents are charged with providing an equitable education for all students and must become active, participatory interventionists in school improvement. Beneath an umbrella of school

improvement, educational accountability under NCLB reforms and mandates has required, regardless of student ethnicity or socio-economic status, the call for superintendents to lead district-wide reform efforts to bring all students to proficiency standards (Fusarelli & Fusarelli). As increased accountability has continued to highlight achievement gaps for children of color and children from low-income homes, superintendents clearly need to step up and examine their connection, perception, and direction for improving the educational outcomes for all students. While “some questions have been raised and some practices ‘tweaked,’ but, for the most part, blindness continue to prevent the asking of critical questions” (Sherman, 2008, p. 700).

School Improvement

With increased attention and focus on school improvement, coupled with a rise in expectations for instructional leadership, *why then are some superintendents not directing their districts toward equity and excellence for all students?* It has been previously suggested that some schools have become large, socially conforming educational bureaucracies and in response to calls for school improvement and educational equity superintendents have turned a “blind eye” and a “deaf ear” towards producing any type of substantive response within their districts. In part, concentration on legitimate forms of schooling, (i.e., bus schedules, lunch menus, teacher recruitment) become more important, while little attention is focused on instruction, achievement, and equity for all students.

Rowan and Miskel (1999) also suggests the “hidden” or informal curriculum often gets more attention than academic learning and often focuses attention on ways in

which schools socialize and prepare students to become members of society, rather than focusing on formal elements, such as student learning and curriculum and instruction. Classroom activities, school programs, and direct interaction and engagement of students by teachers and school administrators are designed to facilitate and confer student status while categorizing and preparing students to stratified positions within society.

According to O'Brien (2007), historically embedded within these stratified positions are ever-present structures of advantage for middleclass White students that are supported by school and community stakeholders. Traditionally, these structures of educational bureaucracies become "institutional" operating norms and guides for schools in which children of color are viewed as deficient and lacking of equivalent intellect and culture in comparison to their White peers. As a result, teachers, administrators, and community members maintain degrading and stereotypical representations of other ethnicities.

Interestingly, the view of schools as social institutions of conforming educational bureaucracies could be central to a superintendent's understanding of achievement and academic impacts within their organizations. Without question, "there is no better illustration of the fact that American public schools are working within an institutional arena than the recognition that they are a battleground among competing values in our political culture" (Cibulka, 1997, p. 330). Yet, some school superintendents have failed to look beyond the superficial facade of schooling structures (social, cultural, and political), and have also failed to acknowledge and assume responsibility for guiding the

organization toward maximizing academic performance and educational equity for all students.

The ability of a superintendent to examine and address inequitable student performance would seem to be a key attribute toward guiding the districts' efforts in increasing student achievement and school reform efforts. According to Sherman (2008) the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was the most singular piece of reform legislation that targeted unparalleled attention to closing of achievement gaps between groups of students. Through the use of a thorough framework of performance assessments, adherence to standards, and accountability reporting, NCLB has linked school superintendents to group and individual student performance. Increased scrutiny and analysis of student performance data resulted in acknowledgment that student achievement gaps are not acceptable, subsequently producing a shift in expectation for elimination of achievement gaps by school superintendents as instructional leaders (Sherman, 2008).

Willis and Peterson (1995) state the manner in which superintendents examine, focus, and make sense of "their" world consequently directs their reform efforts in their districts. Improvement efforts and mandated reforms no longer allow achievement gaps to be ignored. School improvement as referenced by Grogan and Sherman (2003) affirm,

Superintendents must be dedicated to the continuous improvement of all schools and diverse populations of students in their districts. Superintendents, as instructional leaders, must be attuned to test score data and discrepancies that may exist between various racial groups if they want to be sure that all students have a chance of reaching their potential. (p. 231)

The use of data to guide campus and district leaders in improvement efforts is suggested as a needed component for effective change efforts in district achievement and equity reforms associated with school improvement (Petersen & Young, 2005). Several studies (Skrla et al., 2000; Togneri & Anderson, 2003) have found that in high-performing districts that have increased student achievement and equity for all students, superintendents have incorporated data-driven assessments and evaluations in their plans for continuous school improvement efforts.

A review of school improvement literature reveals the majority of empirical evidence has focused on principal leadership effects and not on school superintendents (Bjork, 1993; Leithwood, 2005; Ogawa & Hart, 1985; Peterson, 1984). Only until recently has research emerged regarding the importance and significance for the role of school superintendents in guiding and directing district-wide school improvement (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Archer, 2005). As an emerging area of school improvement research and of particular significance is further investigation regarding the complex connection between district leadership and equitable academic achievement for all students.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Paradigms, like theories, can be either explicit or implicit....Choice of a paradigm, whether deliberate or unthinking, determines much about the research that will be done. The style, design, and approach of a research undertaking, indeed, the likelihood that it will bear fruit, are conditioned in large part by the paradigm with which a researcher begins. (Gage, 1963)

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to investigate public school superintendent self-efficacy and its perceived influence on instructional leadership in districts with persistent student achievement inequities for economically disadvantaged and students of color. Within this umbrella of inquiry, the intent was to focus on understanding the superintendents' perception of their role as a district educational and instructional leader through a critical interpretivist framework that seeks to explore their perceptions through a lens of influence of power and authority in which some students benefit educationally to the detriment of others. Specifically, the study attempted to reveal: (a) How do superintendents in school districts in which children of color and children from low-income homes persistently under-perform perceive their effectiveness in the area of instructional leadership and (b) What are superintendents' perceptions about how their instructional leadership beliefs are influenced by the context of federal and state accountability in which they work.

In this chapter, the research design, sample selection, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, credibility, researcher perspective, and biases will be presented. Just as disciplines and methods within qualitative research are multiple and diverse, research designs are just as numerous and varied. Choosing the appropriate

methodology and research design is crucial to addressing the research questions under study.

Research Design

This research study examined self-efficacy and its influence on instructional leadership and student achievement with three Texas school district superintendents using a qualitative inquiry approach. This study also employed a critical interpretative mode of inquiry that sought to liberate through social and cultural assimilation those ideals, frameworks, and principles that illustrate the structures of power, privilege, and oppression in educational practice.

I chose to use a qualitative research method because of the need for contextual understanding of the “lived experience” that I believe is crucial to the construction of meaning and discovery of inductive, holistic knowledge. Acknowledging the absence of an absolute, definitive procedure for conducting qualitative research, Merriam (1998) stresses several essential characteristics are found in all forms:

- Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning that people have constructed, that is how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.
- The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Data are mediated through the human instrument, the researcher, rather than through some inanimate inventory, questionnaire, or computer.
- Qualitative research usually involves fieldwork. The researcher must physically go to the people, setting, site, institution (the field) in order to observe behavior in its natural setting.
- Qualitative research primarily employs an inductive research strategy. That is, this type of research builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than tests existing theory.

- Qualitative research focuses on process, meaning, and understanding, the product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive. (pp. 6-8)

In this study, incorporation of a critical interpretivist approach within the umbrella of qualitative research has great importance for focusing on the descriptive and explanatory elements of self-efficacy. More so, as a critical model of research, the recognition that differential power, authority, and oppression exist within our educational system serves to link relationally to the understanding of how, “as raced, classed and gendered actors,” (Carspecken & Apple, 1992, pp. 549-550) continual perpetuation of student inequities for economically disadvantaged and students of color might occur. It is important to note, as a critical piece of inquiry, this research was intended to be exactly that critical – critical of the superintendency.

Case Study Methodology

Case study research can be differentiated from other types of research designs by the attention to a singular focus of phenomenon by the researcher who seeks to reveal particular contextual factors characteristic of the phenomena. In order to gain as full of an understanding as possible of superintendent self-efficacy and its effect on instructional leadership and student achievement, this study utilized a case study design that provided the researcher with “bounded” insights, discoveries, interpretations, and interactions within a contextual frame. (Merriam, 1998).

Inherent with the use of a qualitative case study design are characteristics that served to provide “uniqueness” and “specificity” for the phenomenon under study. These distinctive characteristics allow for further refinement of a research focus and afford the qualitative researcher with the necessary tools and features to shed an intense light on

the phenomenon with the intent of gathering as much data as possible. Through analysis and interpretation of collected information, the researcher can produce a thick description and contextual meaning of communicated knowledge. Thus, Merriam (1998) asserts, “Qualitative case studies can be characterized as being particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic” (p. 29) thereby assisting the researcher in the understanding of a view of reality that individuals under study have constructed by interaction with their social worlds. These defining characteristics and features according to Stake (1981) provide knowledge that is

- More concrete—case study knowledge resonates with our own experience because it is more vivid, concrete, and sensory.
- More contextual—our experiences are rooted in context, as is knowledge in case studies. This knowledge is distinguishable from the abstract, formal knowledge derived from other research designs.
- More developed by reader interpretation—readers bring to a case study their own experience and understanding, which lead to generalizations when new data for the case are added to old data.
- Based more on reference populations determined by the reader—in generalizing as described above, readers have some population in mind. Thus, unlike traditional research, the reader participates in extending generalizations to reference populations. (Stake, 1981, pp. 35-36)

As different methods of inquiry require varying methods of research design, a case study approach allows for varying applications of inductive reasoning to assist in the process of inference and generalization to allow for the extension of the researchers conceptual framework of understanding. A key caveat of qualitative research is the concern for gaining an understanding from the participants’ perspective through in-

depth, shared effort to understand the specific and associated individual contextual experiences (Stake, 1995).

The ability to interpret and explain a phenomenon has to be more than simply describing it. Indeed, a simple description of self-efficacy by a superintendent is insufficient to appropriately gain an insider perspective of its influence on instructional leadership and achievement.

Case studies, by definition, get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly by means of direct observations in natural settings, partly by their access to subjective factors (thoughts, feelings, and desires), whereas experiments and surveys often use convenient derivative data, e.g. test results, official records. (Bromley, 1986, p. 23)

Texas school superintendents in this study all formed their beliefs, values, and perceptions from their experiences, interactions, and connections with students of varying ethnicities and economic capacities. Their beliefs are real. Their values are genuine. Their perceptions are authentic. Selection of a case study design provides the best means of understanding these complex units and, therefore, is the best fit for illuminating the understanding of superintendent self-efficacy and its effect on instructional leadership and student achievement.

Through the construction of revealed knowledge gained through the use of a case study approach, a richer holistic interpretation of self-efficacy and its influence upon two domains of educational practice can be uncovered. Furthermore, the use of a case study provides a more “realistic and detailed representation” of the human experience and increases the ability to integrate theory and practice (Bromley, 1986). Not only is the knowledge base regarding superintendent self-efficacy potentially increased, but the

actual aim of integration of the constructed knowledge base also has the potential to produce enlightenment and emancipation for human action, resulting in the elimination of racial and low socio-economic achievement inequities throughout our public educational system and thus produce truly high and equitable schooling for all students (Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, & Silverman, 2004).

Qualitative Researcher as Data Collection Instrument

Collecting data in a qualitative study in most cases involves the researcher as the primary instrument by which data are gathered through interviews, observations and documents (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Merriam, 1998). As a core instrument of inquiry,

interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way or researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience effects the way they carry out that experience.... Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action. (Seidman, 1998, p. 4)

The goal of this research was to gain a greater understanding of superintendent self-efficacy and its perceived influence on instructional leadership in districts with persistent student achievement inequities for economically disadvantaged and students of color. Therefore, not only am I trying to gain a greater understanding of superintendents' beliefs and perceptions, but I also wish to have a greater understanding of their specific influence and how that influence has affected achievement inequities for economically disadvantaged and students of color.

In order to achieve this level of understanding, a person-to-person interview best serves this type of qualitative research. According to Patton (1990), the purpose of this type of interview is to seek out what is unobservable and those things that cannot be seen

or replicated such as feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and intentions within a research participant's context.

Interviews

I want to “find” out and “get” at what is in superintendents' minds regarding efficacy perceptions and how through instructional leadership they may be influencing student achievement within their schools. To do that, interviewing is necessary. Patton (1990) asserts,

We cannot observe how people have organized their world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. (p. 196)

This researcher chose to use a semi-structured interview design, which provides a less structured response format for research participants. Utilization of a semi-structured interview format provides the researcher with the use of a guiding set of questions that assists in the maintaining of an interview focus while allowing research participants the opportunity to communicate their replies in their own unique ways. This format also provides the researcher with the capability to further extend and explore the range of emerging views and comments communicated by the participant. It provides the researcher with additional flexibility to “respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74).

In preparation for conducting the interviews, a list of 27 open-ended questions (Appendix A) was prepared that dealt with four areas, specifically reflecting on the topic of superintendent self-efficacy. These areas included: (a) understanding the transition of the superintendent into the superintendency, (b) superintendent assessment of student

achievement within their district, (c) personal held beliefs and values as a superintendent, and (d) their personal opinions regarding their capacity to produce equitable student achievement for all students.

By using open-ended questions, this questioning provided the opportunity to allow the participant to respond in his/her own words and to encourage his/her own voice to resonate in the data. Throughout the course of the interview, particular follow-up questions were asked that were stimulated by either a response or statement made by the research participant or by a need for additional response clarification by the researcher. In addition, at the end of each interview, all superintendents were given the opportunity to provide any additional information and make any clarifying comments and/or statements relating to any of the questions asked by the researcher. Each participant could refrain from responding to any question asked by the researcher. Two interviews per individual participant were conducted and audio recorded within a mutually agreed upon time that was not to exceed 45 minutes.

Observations

The researcher employed the use of journaling of participant observations and reactions as another important element of data collection during the interview process. The use of participant observations within this research study was guided by the researcher's interest in documentation of any potential unconscious or conscious responses by the research participants in terms of behaviors, actions, and emotions that would serve as any type of non-verbal communication as a result of questioning. As a researcher, my own role, thoughts, and reflections as well as any observational and

procedural comments are an important part of the interview and data collection experience. Merriam (1998) states, “observations are also conducted to triangulate emerging findings; that is, they are used in conjunction with interviewing and document analysis to substantiate the findings” (p. 96). These observations served as additional sources of richly, descriptive data acknowledging firsthand researcher-observed experiences rather than relying solely on secondhand responses relayed by research participants. In summary, data collection for this research study included audiotapes of the interview process and the researcher’s journal of observations and field notes.

Documents

Acknowledging interviewing and observing were two data collection strategies that primarily focused on addressing the research questions under study, several interview participants did provide supporting documents to support stated facts, opinions, and/or summaries of accomplishments. These documents as firsthand, primary sources of documentation served as additional components of triangulation. In some instances, participant-provided documents assisted in the general communication of understanding and descriptive meaning contributing to a greater appreciation for the “contextual richness” of information identified during participant-taped conversations. Documents were only used as supporting pieces of documentation, i.e., referenced supplements to identified or discussed items during the interview.

Participant Selection

Using a purposive sampling method that also incorporated the additional strategy of snowballing (Merriam, 1998), the selection process outlined below was utilized to

identify three potential research participants (district superintendents) for study inclusion.

1. Identification of Texas public school districts from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) 2008 list of districts with one or more campuses with accountability ratings of unacceptable (AU), excluding charter schools and private academies.
2. From the compiled list of districts with AU campuses, the first superintendent (participant #1) was contacted for study inclusion because of the researcher's knowledge of the extended history of unacceptable accountability ratings (greater than 5 years) with one or more campuses and the presence of achievement inequities for children of color and children from low-income homes.
3. At the conclusion of the first interview, superintendent (participant #1) was asked to suggest a second superintendent (participant #2) for study inclusion based on acknowledging the incorporation of interview content, conversation, and the ability to communicate their insights and beliefs regarding the experiences in the superintendency.
4. Similarly, the selection and interview of the second superintendent (participant #2) and third superintendent (participant #3) followed the same procedure for identification and study inclusion.

To expedite and identify the list of possible study participants, TEA was contacted in regard to accessing their 2008 electronic accountability database. The

researcher contacted TEA by telephone and was instructed to submit a written request, detailing desired information needed. Participant study criteria were communicated via e-mail to personnel in the Ad Hoc Reporting division. Two electronic data files were received by e-mail in response to the request by the researcher. The first file contained electronic data representing Texas public school districts from the TEA's 2008 list of districts with one or more campuses with accountability ratings of unacceptable (AU), excluding charter schools and private academies. The second file was comprised of data representing the name and contact information of each district superintendent identified from the previously generated list of 2008 AU districts with one of more campuses, excluding charter schools and private academies. Both files were placed into an Excel spreadsheet (Appendix B) for use in selection, identification, and contacting of study participants.

Data Analysis

All audiotapes of recorded interviews were transcribed in their entirety. Primary data interpretation and analytical conceptualization were occurring throughout the research process, in particular, the contemplation of methodologically linking superintendent self-efficacy using a critical interpretivist framework to instructional leadership and student achievement. As Anyon (2009) states,

We employ critical theory to direct us to appropriate empirical research strategies, and to extend the analytical, critical—and sometimes emancipatory—power of our data gathering and interpretation... and our point is to engage research and the data it yields in constant conversation with a theoretical arsenal of powerful concepts. (p. 2)

Recognizing participant descriptions of self-efficacy could not adequately explain or enlighten ones' understanding; one must also examine the social and contextual force in which superintendent self-efficacy is constructed and employed.

Critical theory “can be a powerful tool with which to make links between educational ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ between past, present, and future, and between research design and larger social meaning” (Anyon, 2009, p. 3). Throughout this study, I continually questioned the connection of linkages to superintendent action or the lack thereof and whether or not epistemologically construction of knowledge gained from conducting this investigation could adequately interpret the perceptive reality of superintendents who have failed to achieve equitable academic success for all students. Crucial to the formation of my analytical lens for data analysis was the connection between critical interpretation and contextualization of communicated superintendent self-efficacy perceptions and instructional leadership in the districts they serve.

In preparation for the use of a critical interpretative analytical lens, I felt I needed a greater understanding of the linkages researchers might use in “critique” construction of an integrated, interwoven connection to research and practice. Both Layder (1998) and Brannen (2004) aided in my lens formation through their works on interpretation and contextualization of the data analytical process.

Layder (1998) maintains analytical interpretation is constructed by the “bridging” of concepts whereby linking “actors” to the underlining implication and “interpenetrations” of the social reality under study. Layder (1998) further argues by focusing on the ways in which these actors refer to their social reality, interpretations can

create linkages between participants' communicated reality and different types of systemic and institutional structures.

Reflecting upon the necessity of conceptualization of data in the design stage of research methodology and the subsequent reconceptualization of data to “make sense,” Brannen (2004) makes the case qualitative researchers can develop new insights and contribute value to their research as a whole through incorporation of recontextualization in data analyses to reference secondary sources of quantitative data in response to “ontological, epistemological and theoretical assumptions” (p. 324). Both these researchers place a great deal of significance for justification and reflection of the interpretation and recontextualization processes during data analysis, which is reflective of the interpretivist perspective. Combining both interpretivist and critical paradigms into one analytical lens provided the researcher with the potential to illuminate the distortion of superintendent self-efficacy through thoughtful analysis and reflection on instructional leadership thereby creating enlightenment and self-reflection, “which is a necessary step in the course of moving society toward empowerment of all citizens” (Willis, 2007, p. 87).

Analyzing my own introspective thinking and self-questioning of analytical methodology and frames, I believe the use of a critical interpretivist perspective provided the greatest potential for interpretation and the ability to make meaning of experiences that may or may not be openly acknowledged while providing the greatest possibility of highlighting any linkages between superintendent self-efficacy and inequitable academic achievement for students of color and children from low-income

homes. Subsequently, I interpreted the interview data from a critical interpretivist perspective and employed several types of interpretivist techniques.

Drawing upon critical data analysis techniques described by Morse (1994), transcript interviews were read several times initially in combination with a reviewing of field notes and observations. Relevant discourses were identified and highlighted. From each participant interview, identified discourses were then summarized. Additional points of clarification and follow-up questions for the second round of participant questioning were prepared using summarized transcripts and summarized discourses. Prior to the second participant interview, research participants were provided copies of individual transcripts from the first interview for confirmation of captured experiences. Additional elaboration or corrections to the transcript identified by the participant were noted and documented at this time. Transcript modifications were then analyzed with previously identified discourses for possible influence and/or inclusion.

Utilizing constructed summarized discourses, themes were generated to represent similar or typical patterns of responses. Identified themes were subsequently analyzed by employment of a critical lens to include broad and specific participant narratives or “bite” extractions of transcribed participant data. The identification of supported critical themes was then identified with contradictions, or points of tension, which facilitated the development of “theorizing” of connections and associations within and between participant narratives.

During this stage of analysis, numerous communications and conversations were held with my dissertation chair regarding identified critical themes and their linkages. To

bring about a critical interpretation in the data analysis and a deeper meaning and collective understanding from the collected data, additional reflective questioning was utilized. Reflective questions such as, “What meanings were uncovered? What meanings did the participant obscure? What does failure by the participant to address the question presented, mean? What does silences in responses mean? What conflicts were present and/or concealed?” Questions such as these provided the continued deconstruction of responses that acknowledged the critical assessment and illumination of school superintendent false consciousness and distortion of schooling reality in which they work.

Continuing with both deconstruction (uncovering of different voices) and illumination (increasing of awareness and enlightenment) processes, the final step of critical interpretative analysis was aimed at uncovering perceptions and informing of superintendent beliefs and values thereby increasing awareness for their existence and subsequent emancipation and empowerment of marginalized students of color and students of low socio-economic status. Essential aspects of superintendent narratives were analyzed, critiqued, and comparisons and contrasts of participant experiences as well as variations in communicated experiences were identified.

To further deepen the contextual understanding and meaning of their experiences, the researcher requested superintendent study participants suggest other superintendents to include in the study as research participants. A form of data triangulation between the interviewed superintendents formed. Each superintendent who suggested another for study inclusion had some prior knowledge of the other in terms of

school district size, demographics, tenure, etc. and generally communicated high regard for the other in terms of accomplishments and job performance. Instead of just one, unassociated experience in which to extract critical themes, multiple perspectives (3) were produced. Inclusion of study participants by interviewed superintendents appeared to be based on their beliefs in some commonality or similarity of experiences to exist between them, whether similarity between districts, student make-up, or reputation for “doing good things” in their respective districts.

From the combination of derived central, core themes and meanings from varying accounts of superintendent personal experiences that focused on instructional leadership and personal effectiveness, analysis of research findings was concluded by the recontextualization of emerging themes into other settings that “support established knowledge/theory, and to claim clearly new contributions” (Morse, 1994, p. 34). Reconceptualization of data is a necessary step of cognitive analysis and discourse and is predicated on the development and fostering of critical self-reflection that seeks the removal of the distortion and provides a clearer picture of actual reality (Willis, 2007).

In the case of this study, understanding superintendent self-efficacy must go beyond just knowing their perceptions and beliefs but should also seek to transform superintendent practices and beliefs in order to truly achieve educational equity for all marginalized students of color and students of low socio-economic status.

Trustworthiness

I chose to incorporate several different methodologies and strategies to enhance internal validity in this study. Through the use of observational journals, taped audio

interviews, member checks, and researcher reflectivity, I chose to triangulate the multitude of data collected in this study. Triangulation, or the process by which multiple sources of data are “pooled” together to synthesize and corroborate emerging findings proved to be a useful approach (Merriam, 1998). Prior, during, and after each interview, I recorded researcher observations and comments regarding the participant, participant settings, as well as thoughts and reflections of the interview experience. Each interview was audiotaped. This allowed the researcher to play back, transcribe, and reflect on the interview questions and responses and, in some instances, reframe and/or clarify questions for the second interview session. After each initial interview, a copy of the transcribed audiotape was given to each superintendent for review prior to the second follow-up interview. Any clarification, correction, and/or additional commentary on the transcribed interview occurred prior to the second interview, providing participants in the study with an opportunity to check for accuracy and authenticity of collected data.

Within many critical interpretivist qualitative research studies, the employment of researcher reflexivity is crucial to the formation of interpretations of data originating from multiple perspectives and recollections of memories and experiences. “Because human beings are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, interpretations of reality are accessed directly” and relationally (Merriam, 1998, p. 203). Thus, by the employment of researcher reflexivity, a greater perspective and understanding of superintendent self-efficacy within a holistic and contextual framework of interpretation resulted in a more accurate and closer reality thereby providing added strength and rigor for internal validity.

Limitations

The process of conducting critical qualitative research serves to highlight the distinction of limitations, which in many instances must be confronted and acknowledged. In many instances, these limitations serve as principal strengths of qualitative research and include:

- the researcher serving as the principal instrument of data collection and, therefore, accepts recognition and acknowledgement of researcher biases;
- thick descriptions form the basis of interpretation through recollections and experiences that result from the combining of researcher accounts of the participant experiences and communicated meanings and;
- through the use of voice, the researcher expresses subjectivity in his/her findings (Eisner, 1998).

In addition to limitations specific to qualitative research, it is important to note the construction and development of my own lens in the participatory and reflective framework that serves as the core of this critical research. I am a male, White, middle-aged, an educator and school administrator that many would categorize as “one of the boys” in terms of predominance and level of authority in public school administration within school districts in Texas. I am educated, having completed a bachelor’s degree in Biology with a minor in Psychology, two masters’ degrees in Science and Education, and Biology, Psychology, Principal, and Superintendent certifications. I have over ten years of teaching and administrative experience that represent a full range in diversity of

districts: small, White rural; large, urban multi-racial; small, African American/Hispanic rural; and one large, White urban university teaching experience.

I currently serve as curriculum director for four districts and ten campuses that range from predominately White, middle-class students to primarily low socio-economic, African American, and Hispanic students depending upon which of the four districts I am working in on any given day. The diversity of districts presents a constant challenge for adaptations and variations of procedures and practices and has facilitated my use of reflexivity in my actions and behaviors. Also, incorporated into my contextual lens is the constant attention to school and district improvement in several of my districts in which I represent and serve as an internal member of campus intervention teams that facilitate and monitor best practices and initiatives within schools that are deemed to be low-performing and labeled as unacceptable with regard to federal and state accountability rankings.

I also recognize that my desire to become an educator was predicated on my aspirations to guide and lead a school district as a school superintendent. That is the position that I want and the passion for which drives me to excel in every education endeavor that I have undertaken. Working for and with numerous school superintendents, I wanted to do better. I could do better. Those words have reverberated through my mind many times during the course of my experiences and educational tenure. I have not taken for granted those words and incorporated them into my lens of critical knowledge that seeks to illuminate my thinking, practices and research but also influence and awaken awareness and transformation in others.

As McLaren and Giarelli (as cited in Cherryholmes, 1988) so aptly summarized, “The way we teach or conduct research are products of these influences” (p. 111); and therefore as a critical body of exploration, researcher confrontation within the lives and experiences of their participants is subject to the confrontational power of these influential forces to produce emancipated adults. It is the consciousness construction resulting from confrontational interaction that serves to not only limit this research inquiry but the ability to achieve emancipation rests squarely on the limitations of critique and the willingness of the researcher and participants to question inequities, seek illumination of superintendent perceptions as effective instructional leaders, and finally, transform through elimination racial and low socio-economic achievement inequalities in the public educational system.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS: CITY RAILWAY INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

There are two things that we say here in City Railway ISD as employees. Number one, if you survive the year here, then you can work anywhere in Texas; and number two, there is no place like this in the entire world. You talk about a local school, local community, and culture, this is it! This is all we can do about it is talk about it. It rings true. (Superintendent, City Railway ISD, 2009)

Introduction

To focus on the critical interpretivist design of this study, the findings of this study must be drawn from the individualistic perceptions, beliefs, and thoughts of interviewed superintendents from within the context of instructional leadership and effectiveness. Interestingly, the incorporation and exploration of both of these contextual concepts served not only to highlight dynamic differences in thoughts and perceptions by study participants but underscored the complexity and convolution of the interpretivist frame.

As a critical interpretivist researcher, I recognize and acknowledge the focus of this study is my own interpretation experience as defined by each superintendent that I interviewed. Primarily, the distinctiveness of each interview participant and his “rich and thick experiences” have guided my decision to address each one individually in separate chapters. As such, the findings from three school district superintendents will be discussed in order of initial researcher contact and subsequent interview and follow-up interview.

Data collected from both the initial and follow-up interviews were compiled to form the basis of findings presented in Chapters IV, V, and VI. Chapter IV highlights

findings from interviews with Kevin Lee, the superintendent of City Railway Independent School District (CRISD) in which Themes 1-4 are identified. In Chapter V, findings from interviews with Ed, the superintendent from Calvin Independent School District (CISD) are presented in which Themes 5-7 are identified. Chapter VI highlights findings and the identification of Themes 8-10 from two interviews with Paul, the superintendent of Riverview Independent School District (RISD). In Chapter VII, a summarization of research themes is presented as well as additional discussions, interpretations, and an analysis of thematic interrelatedness.

District Background

City Railway Independent School District is a small, rural school district located in one of the state's oldest and historic cities (City Railway). Located between two major universities, the school district is within an hour drive to each. As with many early Texas communities, great wealth and prosperity was later followed by a general decline and reversal of economic affluence and population. A major highway essentially has historically divided the community by ethnicity and divides the city into two segregated residential areas.

To the west of the highway, primarily people of color, mostly low-income African Americans and Hispanics reside in a variety of housing from mobile homes to small frame houses. To the east of the highway, most of the White, more affluent citizens reside in many large, historic Plantation and Victorian style homes. The school district is comprised of two schools, West Railway Elementary (PK-5th) and North Railway Middle/High School (6-12th).

West Railway Elementary School construction began in the late 1920's for students of color as a result of grants and donations from multiple sources. The Rosenwald Foundation was instrumental in providing seed money to begin the school's actual construction. Numerous additional local donations from the African American community were also received as well as grants from the local taxing entity to assist in the school's actual completion in 1930. North Railway Middle/High School was also constructed in the early 1900's as a multi-story building housing multiple elementary and secondary grades for White students. Following school desegregation, all elementary students began attending West Railway Elementary School and secondary students began attending North Railway Middle/High School. Both schools are currently in use and serve as active reminders of the diverse history of City Railway. Student ethnicities over the years have shifted from a predominately White school district to one of color, predominately African American. Whereas, school ethnicities shifted, so did the reflected increase in percentages of low socio-economic students.

As a small school district, CRISD is comprised of approximately 200 students in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. The majority of African American and Hispanic students represent approximately 95% of the total student population with the remaining 5% representing White ethnicity. Over 90% of students are economically disadvantaged, and approximately 40% are classified as at-risk, with an approximate two-year average of 3% of students dropping out of school each year. As identified on one of the most recent district accountability reports, over 50% of the total district staff is classified as minority. Approximately 45% of the teaching staff is comprised of

African American and Hispanic ethnicities resulting in a 55% White teaching staff differentiation.

Over the last three years, I have driven through this small city (approximately 1,500 citizens per 2000 census) on average five days a week for the last three years. Passing through the city on the main highway on both sides of the road, you encounter many old and vacant buildings in which some have undergone or are in the process of undergoing various stages of renovation. Similar to many declining cities and townships, empty storefronts and shuttered businesses dot the cityscape with embedded signs of life and prosperity exhibited by a few existing and open establishments.

Rarely, have I stopped or patronized any of these businesses and in fact consciously have made a point to plan purchases to avoid having to stop in City Railway. It has been my experience whether I was purchasing gasoline, or trying to buy a gift, the items were more expensive with fewer choices and having to deal with persistent “pan-handlers” on several occasions at the local convenience store was something that I wanted to avoid. In recent years, mom and pop specialty shops, antique stores, and various restaurants have come and gone and the local Chamber of Commerce in promotion of city tourism continually touts the city as containing one of the largest concentrations of Victorian era residences built between 1870 and 1900 in Texas.

Observations and Annotations

On the day of the first superintendent interview, I arrived early and drove by each of the CRISD schools, making mental notes of locations, condition of facilities, and general impressions of the surrounding area and structures. The first school I drove by

was West Railway Elementary. Located on the west side of town, West Railway Elementary was located on the outskirts of town on a farm-to-market road in which various types of single family residential and multi-family housing appeared to be in need of various types of repairs and improvements. The school, while appearing old and unimpressive, appeared to be clean and neatly maintained.

While sitting in the parking lot in my car, I noted that several portable buildings appeared to be in use and as students exited the school at the end of the day, numerous African American students were observed walking down side streets individually and in small groups, presumably on their way home. I did not observe any White students exit the building, nor did I see any White students walking on the streets in any direction. I presume either they rode busses home or had parents waiting to pick them up, and while observing other students, I simply missed them leaving.

Leaving West Railway Elementary, I drove back down the farm-to-market road towards town in search of the middle/high school locations. Crossing over the major highway, I headed east down several side streets and drove by quite a few rather large and impressive homes, churches, and a large cemetery and park area. I noted that on this side of town, large and grand Victorian era homes sprawled over large landscaped and tree-covered lots.

The quantity, style, architecture, and spaciousness that many homes in this area portrayed took me aback. Although many homes had been maintained and/or restored, I did spot a few homes that had seen better times. Overall in comparison to the condition, size, and quality of homes found across the highway, there could hardly be any

comparisons drawn. Simply crossing over the highway that divided the east side from the west side highlighted at least from an outsider's perspective the difference between "those that have it, and those that don't" in terms of, if nothing else, money and privilege. While driving around, I noticed several residents sitting on their porches, working in their yards, or chatting with neighbors. These residents were all White. I did not see one person of color on this side of town, either at a home, in a yard, or for that matter, driving a car.

The middle school/high school campus is located on the far east side of town. The main school facility is an older, brick two-story building that appeared to be constructed in the early 1900's with some evidence of periodic renovations and upgrades visible. Spending just a few minutes in the campus parking lot, I assessed the surrounding landscape. The school building and grounds seemed to be well kept and appeared at least from an outward perception to be neatly maintained. Across from the school, a large fenced cemetery served as a visible illustration and reminder of previous wealth and prestige as evidenced by grandiose markers, statues, and gravesites of early inhabitants.

Cognizant of my interview appointment with the school superintendent, I drove back towards town. The administrative offices of CRISD are located in a converted storefront building on the highway that divides the city. I noted as I parked my car the administrative offices were on the east side of the highway. More so, I realized as I closed the district office door, not only is the superintendent White but also all of the office staff that I had spoke with on the telephone and encountered up to this point were

also White. While waiting to begin my interview session, I was thinking that in a community that is reported to have more African American residents than Whites, this did not appear to be reflective of my interactions with district personnel. I had not spoken with nor encountered any persons of color in the district.

Superintendent Background

Given the “superintendent will see you now, follow me” gesture, I was ushered to the back of the room where I could see an office with a large desk covered with stacks of papers and materials. In front of the desk were a few chairs lined up along the wall. Seated behind the desk was a recognizable face. Kevin Lee and I had taken the same course one semester in our dissertation coursework at a nearby university but from different professors. At some point during the semester, our professors combined the classes periodically in a form of team teaching. We had met briefly through these encounters, and at that time, he was the principal in the district that he now serves in as school superintendent.

An extended hand precipitated a confident and firm handshake by Kevin Lee. Looking to be approximately in his mid-40’s, he appeared relaxed and at ease with being interviewed. As I pulled out my digital recorder and my old, trusty cassette recorder we talked about the status of our dissertations and my progress and in his case, the lack of progress in completing his. I just was not comfortable with solely relying on the digital recorder, and explained to him my only purpose in using two recording devices was my general discomfort and unfamiliarity with a new electronic device. However, the ease of data storage and transmission with the digital technology necessitated its use.

My intent was to electronically store the interview data on my desktop computer, and if needed, the capability existed to electronically send the data to a transcriptionist quickly and easily. As it turned out, I transcribed all of the interviews myself and found the use of media player software and a word processing program worked very well.

Kevin Lee over the span of 17 years in education has worked in six different districts in varying capacities as a teacher, coach, principal, and most recently school superintendent. Kevin Lee received his bachelor's degree from Sam Houston State University and master's degree from Tarleton State University and continued his educational preparation for the superintendency by participating in a 16-hour superintendent certification program from The University of Texas Permian Basin.

Having a desire to continue his education preparation, Kevin Lee began working on his doctoral degree at a nearby university and is currently attempting to begin his dissertation research. Identifying tremendous demands of time and energy as a school superintendent, he communicated the intent to make time in his busy schedule to complete his dissertation, the final phase of his program. Having two years of superintendent experience, all in the current district, Kevin Lee indicated that the challenge of improvement, and the need for help in this district prompted his decision to accept and enter into his current assignment as school superintendent.

Motivation

I asked Kevin Lee about this need for help, motivating him to accept the position of superintendent in CRISD.

We are a rural district and had some accountability issues and some other things that have been a cause for alarm here and [I] felt like, after being advised by

various people, thought this would be a good place to get started and basically learn because there were a lot of trials and tribulations involved with the district that were good for experience, and at the same time the district needed help.

As Kevin Lee pointed out, his reasoning for accepting the position as school superintendent was not only based on accountability issues that needed attention, but also by serving in the position as a first-time school superintendent, he could learn and grow from the experiences. The accountability issues Kevin Lee makes reference to upon clarification are historically poor student academic performance on TAKS, the state accountability assessment of student's knowledge and skills.

In 2008, all three campuses (middle and high school are considered separate campuses for state accountability purposes) earned low-performing, unacceptable performance ratings by the Texas Education Agency. Ratings from prior years (2003-2007) also yielded multiple campus designations of unacceptable performance. It was this persistent lack of student performance and unacceptable rating that I had heard from former teachers of CRISD, administrators of neighboring districts, and fellow doctoral students that intrigued me. I was curious as to Kevin Lee's assessment of the situation upon his appointment as superintendent and if that assessment had changed over the two-year period as acting superintendent.

When I took over, we had three unacceptable campuses...I don't think the classroom instruction back then was organized or at its full potential; therefore, I don't think we were reaching the kids' full potential as I was coming in....To me, what goes on in that classroom is either having a positive or negative impact historically, and part of the job has been correcting those negatives and building those classrooms that we have.

Kevin Lee's identification of multiple unacceptable campuses was a statement of fact of which I was aware, having personal background knowledge of his district. It is

important to note he also made no reference to historical and persistent unacceptable ratings on all of his campuses. The lack of organized classroom instruction prompted me to question his role and perception of instructional leadership.

Instructional Leadership

[As an instructional leader] I view it as part of my position along with the principal...equally to not quite as equal but very active. We have each other's backs on a lot of things, especially instruction. I try to be there on each campus at least daily, sometimes it does not work that way, but you know I am there one, two, three times a week on each campus, almost religiously.

Clearly, Kevin Lee was attempting to equate himself as an equal with his campus principal in regards to serving as a campus instructional leader. In an attempt to understand how Kevin Lee could perceive himself to be on the same level of instructional leadership as his principal without the daily contact, interaction, and guidance with his teaching staff, I questioned him and asked for clarification.

[As an instructional leader] I am going to support what is going on in our classrooms because I know what is going on in terms of a curriculum perspective, what the expectations are and with our district being as small as it is. I have a pretty good handle on how individual kids have performed historically. It is probably nothing that you would get out of any other district, but here I'm taking it as part of my job.

It would appear after further questioning Kevin Lee, he maintains an intrinsic belief that by supporting his teachers' instructional efforts and acknowledging his students' past performances, he is serving as an instructional leader. Kevin Lee also suggests that because of his district's size and his knowledge of district expectations and classroom practices, that is a unique responsibility that he accepts as a superintendent.

Accountability

Almost in direct contrast to his previously communicated beliefs, he also maintained upon further questioning that as an instructional leader, he believed responsibility for change or lack thereof in student achievement was not his responsibility but his teacher's. As an instructional leader

I still fall back on instruction. I think where the rubber meets the road with accountability and student achievement is with the teachers. Those that may have appeared to not be getting the job done, to embrace the professional development, the curriculum tools and everything that they have access to and you know reshape how they are delivering that instruction. Those that have redone their curricular schemes have done quite well; others who have failed to embrace it and failed to recognize the need for change, basically they are no longer with the district.

Appearing to accept no responsibility as an instructional leader for student achievement and accountability, Kevin Lee placed blame and culpability on the classroom teacher. My first theme emerged; superintendent diverts responsibility for lack of student achievement and accountability, to dominate view of normality. As an instructional leader, Kevin Lee further added when I questioned the change or lack thereof from unacceptable campus ratings year-after-year: "I am attributing that to teachers." I responded with teachers and not the administration? Kevin Lee responded with an emphatic and profound, "Yes." Clearly, it was Kevin Lee's opinion that teachers and only teachers were to blame for historical unacceptable campus ratings.

Effectiveness

Reflecting on his overall statements and beliefs of instructional leadership, I was curious as to Kevin Lee's perception of his ability to influence student achievement and if he believed he was actually an effective superintendent and instructional leader.

I believe I am [an effective superintendent]. Instructional improvement...money management... communication with the board...I think those would be the top three things that I bring to this office.

As a self-professed effective superintendent, with instructional improvement considered to be one of three primary qualities, he also identified fiscal responsibility and his communicative expertise with the school board as other areas of effectiveness. I asked Kevin Lee to help me understand how an effective superintendent and instructional leader is able to influence student achievement.

Trust

Identifying the importance of his actions and behaviors specifically in the area of establishment and building of trust in his rural community he related:

They [students and parents] trust people they know that they have seen on a multi-year basis when you are in a situation where you have a lot of turnover; teachers and administrators, the whole shooting match. Our students do not develop a level of trust. Now that I have been here a few years, I do not want to say what I say is the gospel, but they believe something when I tell it to them because they have a trust factor in me that I do not think they have that with a lot of people...It doesn't matter if the superintendent, principal, or the classroom teacher or coach because of high turnover our secondary students do not trust people the first year....It is almost an unwritten code that says that I'm going to sit in here and I may do what you want me to do and I may not because how do I know you're committed to me.

Kevin Lee's statements appear to suggest the capacity for trust with his stakeholders is predicated on school personnel tenure with the district. Specifically, the lack of trusting relationships from stakeholders within his district is the direct result of high personnel turnover.

Kevin Lee's perception of his earlier tenure as a teacher/coach and his return to CRISD as principal and superintendent he believes has aided in the establishment of a

personal trust factor with his students. Specifically, his ability to influence student achievement is guided by

a comfortability factor that to me it glares. It glares! I can tell people...I can go and grab a student and probably say things to them that no other White person can say to them in this entire town...The only other people that can trump that would be someone that is African American.

Race

Kevin Lee's statement that race could actually supersede his perceived level of tenured trust prompted my next line of questioning and clarified the emergence of a second theme that Kevin Lee referred to as "racial issues." I asked Kevin Lee if he believed an African American teacher coming into the district would get any better buy-in or trust from his students. His affirmative response prompted our continued conversation around the issue of his perception of race and how race has and is continuing to influence student achievement in his district.

I know the tape recorder is on but it really falls down to a racial divide to me...It's a comfortability factor, cultural whatever it is, is there. It's an element that's there... [Unique to CRISD] I'm thinking yes....

Stating a cultural, distinctive racial divide exists in CRISD, I asked Kevin Lee to further explain his perception of the racial divide and if he believed racial divisions currently existed within his schools. He communicated his belief that during his earlier tenure as teacher/coach, dissociation between White and Black students were a contributing factor to the lack of student achievement. "I saw it when I coached here." Referencing his current district climate, however, Kevin Lee does not believe a racial divide currently exists on his campuses and within his schools.

I am not sure that I attribute that to anything other than one part of the equation [absence of White students] almost being non-existent...one of the obvious things even though we are in 2009 is some racial issues. [White flight] has to come to mind when you are talking about a district that is now almost 100% Black.

In Kevin Lee's opinion White flight has resulted in the elimination of student racial divisions on his campuses.

Although Kevin Lee appeared to be confident and comfortable with his assessment of an absence of a racial divide within his district, his confidence in speech appeared to diminish somewhat when I posed the same question regarding a racial divide within City Railway. Referencing physical ethnic divisions within City Railway and his belief in a verbal racist White population existing in the community, Kevin Lee believes a very racially divided town currently exists.

Here you have a divided town. You have the west side of town that is predominately Black and the east side of town is predominately White. There have been pretty vocal [White] contingencies here in town that aren't afraid to say they don't like Black people, period.

Racism

In reference to Kevin Lee's statement of hatred of Black people in the community by White's, he aroused my interest sufficiently to question if the same type of perceived hatred in the community also existed within the Black community.

I will share a funny story with you....My first year here back as an administrator, I had an issue with a parent and a kid that got to my office....We argued and tussled, everything back and forth for about 30 minutes and of course we are talking about a Black momma and a Black child. At the end of it, she finally says I am through discussing this and it's time for me to go. She got her son and they went and said, "that's why I hate White people"...

Attempting to exemplify the lack of mutual trust and hatred for other races, Kevin Lee's belief this is a "funny story" is suggestive to me of his inability to "see" and "feel" the level of frustration and dissatisfaction with the educational system as it existed. These statements of mistrust and hatred for other races prompted me to question Kevin Lee on "who" is perpetuating the obvious racist and negative attitudes that seem to exist in City Railway.

I think a lot of it is the old guard [elderly, White people]...a lot of it is what gets published...what you get out of the television and the Blue Bird [regional] newspaper...is how lousy you did on the TAKS score compared to everybody else. It does not say on there that all of City Railway's kids are poor Black children and 75% of University City kids are wealthy, White kids... and then the old guard comes in with their little bits and pieces about being unsafe and everybody is on drugs and everything else...

It is Kevin Lee's opinion the citing of biased media reporting of TAKS scores in combination with negative community perceptions from elderly White individuals is continuing to foster racist divisions within City Railway. Although Kevin Lee's assessment of the absence of a racial divide within his schools apparently did not imply racist actions and behaviors did not exist. Addressing his perception of staffing and the absence of any person of color in administrative roles either within the district or campuses, I asked Kevin Lee if the absence of a person of color in a leadership role might be a contributing factor (referencing racist sentiments and lack of student achievement).

It could be. A lot of people within the district would say that a Black principal would be worse here. [Why?] Because they would constantly get hounded. [Hounded for what?] For being a traitor! I don't know if the expectation culturally is that since you're one of us you can't be that hard liner....When you bring in an African American coach and have his substitute as part of hallway discipline or something like that, it works great, but when you bring up the adage

of bringing up an African American male for high school principal or district principal, it's a "I don't know." Some years ago, we had a Black administrator and I wasn't here...and the Black people on staff can't stand him to this day.

It would appear that Kevin Lee's perception of the district stakeholders is although the school district is primarily made up of African American students, a Black principal in a leadership role would be viewed as a negative. "You have some people that would not want it any other way. I am not just talking about White people, "Pretty much the same thing" is the perception of the staff, and community at large in regards to bringing in an African American candidate, and even with three African American board members "I think there could be some questions." Evidently these anti-Black sentiments are perceived to be present in the school and community. "That filters into the neighbors who have kids that are easily influenced." This acceptance and dominance of White culture as perceived and identified by Kevin Lee serves as a third theme.

The racist influence within the community exists to such a degree that Kevin Lee believes the generational demise of "the old guard" can lessen or decrease strongly held racist beliefs within his community.

It [would] appear that time is curing a lot of that [racist beliefs]. You hate to talk about it in those terms but death is playing a role. As some of those people die out, fewer people are left carrying that torch of discontent.

Clearly, Kevin Lee believes as elderly White citizens of City Railway die, their racist attitudes and perceptions die with them. But do they? Have they already instilled in future generations their racist attitudes and viewpoints?

Success

After taking a short pause to reflect and ponder upon Kevin Lee's previously stated opinions and beliefs, I felt his perception of students' vision of success could perhaps provide some additional insight into the potential negative, racist influence of parents and community members. Being specific, I asked Kevin Lee if he believed students' vision of success could be influenced by perhaps other factors, such as achievement, test scores, and even accountability standards.

I was really anticipating Kevin Lee to respond with the standard, unified reply that we as educators hear and read too frequently as a mission or vision statement, "All students can learn, or all students can be successful." Interestingly, over the course of two interviews, Kevin Lee responded with two visions of success: one from his perspective as the district educational and instructional leader and the other, his own perception of students' vision of success. These vision statements of success did not necessarily reflect congruity and similarity between his view as an administrator and his views of his students as evidenced by the following statements:

Our vision of success is losing that unacceptable rating across the board on the campus level...basically acceptable [TEA accountability rating] is not enough...their vision of success is whatever it takes to pass....The students realize they get a bad rap to begin with from the perception standpoint from outside the world...I do not want to say they are products of a lack of success but for the most part in terms of things your talking about, they really are.

Attempting to seek further clarification regarding his perception for the lack of accountability significance exhibited by his students, I continued questioning Kevin Lee regarding his personal belief that all students, regardless of ethnicity or handicapping condition, could be successful.

Deficit Thinking

That just depends on what your definition of success is. I think all students can improve, but [in terms of accountability] no they can't....It is very basic but I like to think about that one-gallon milk jug. No matter how hard you try, you're not going to be able to put one point x gallons of liquid in that jug. No matter how hard you try, it is not going to happen. Every time you fill that jug up, it is only going to hold a gallon. Sometimes I feel that individual capacity is like that. The more that I look at it especially if you are talking about certain special populations...that is just the way it is.

This deficit perception of student success that Kevin Lee shared did not appear to be influenced by state or federal accountability standards but rather was drawn on the basis of inherent and individualistic expectations or visions of success that he believed only some students possessed. Kevin Lee further commented, "We talked about the different degrees of success that certain students are going to have, may not necessarily mesh with what Commissioner Scott would consider as success."

According to Kevin Lee, his view and that of Commissioner Scott regarding success as defined by accountability are not in alignment. Degrees of student achievement in terms of what some students can do are not aligned with TEA definitions of accountability success.

I think they [teachers and staff members] support it [improvement]....Their view and my view as well as probably a lot of other folks' view is that we are working with the individual student... and we are going to get you [the student] better...that is the approach and the mindset.

Referencing individual improvement, Kevin Lee maintains his belief that not everyone could be successful in terms of meeting state and federal accountability, but yet improvement was possible. These statements regarding the ability for student improvement as well as those of Kevin Lee's regarding the capacity for all students to

achieve and excel highlights a fourth major theme; deficit thinking marginalizes opportunities and successes for children of color and low-income families.

As we ended our conversation regarding student success during the second follow-up interview, it seemed appropriate and timely for me to ask what happens to City Railway graduates. I was really curious at this point as to whether Kevin Lee believed the education process and experiences his students received, prepared them for success in future careers, professions, or post-secondary educational endeavors. If not, what happens to them? Do they stay in City Railway?

Depends some. The lower level achievers that just barely skim by might be peddling; unfortunately that is just the facts. Those that built on the goal of passing and want to build on that goal of being productive, they leave...

It would appear according to Kevin Lee not only is the community racially divided but student success and achievement also divide the students of CRISD. Kevin Lee asserts, students that achieve academic success leave City Railway, while others that struggle and fail to attain academic success remain in the city and become drug dealers.

District Departure Thoughts

As I left the administration office late that afternoon and sitting in my car at the only downtown stoplight in City Railway, I pondered Kevin Lee's statement regarding his perceived outcomes for his students. Was this the reason I was staring at a declining community? Had the local education system failed to produce successful, productive citizens who could choose to remain and sustain a community? Was the community at fault through perpetuation of racial ideals and beliefs that whether consciously or unconsciously have influenced local educators and impacted their ability to be effective

campus and district leaders? All of these questions were racing through my mind as I drove up to the local convenience store to jot a few words down and buy a soft drink. As I got out of my car and walked up to the store, a middle-aged, slim Black woman asking if I “got a dolla” approached me. Reflecting and paraphrasing on the superintendent’s statement, “Only in City Railway” came to mind as I politely declined and walked into the store.

Thematic Summary

The following themes were revealed and identified during Kevin Lee’s initial and follow-up interviews:

1. An “Effective” superintendent diverts responsibility for lack of student achievement, accountability, and maintains a “business as usual approach” to a dominant view of normality,
2. Race perception and racism overtly and covertly persists within the school and community,
3. Acceptance and dominance of White culture highlights a link between power and race, and
4. Deficit thinking marginalizes opportunities and success for children of color and children from low-income families.

In Chapter VII, I will provide a more in-depth discussion of each theme as well as emphasize the interrelatedness of themes in the discussion of possible answers that guided this research study.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS: CALVIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

When I arrived, we were in bad shape....At that point in time, you could really do a mediocre job and still survive....The leadership you know is just, well had a lot of problems...I saw a lot of people where instruction was not driving the thought processes at all. It was all about money, facilities, and all those other kinds of things. It was kinda like the tail was wagging the dog. (Superintendent, Calvin ISD, 2009)

Historical Background

Calvin Independent School District (CISD) is a relatively medium-size, urban school district that originated from voter approval and subsequent land donations during the middle to late 1800's within the township of Calvin, Texas. The city of Calvin was founded as a result of construction and expansion of the railroad, the primary means of transportation for people and products in and out of the region.

Constructed to connect area agriculture lands and mercantile operations to businesses and commodity markets associated with cotton production, the railroad brought economic prosperity to the region. In order to serve its employees, operations, and passengers, the railroad acquired a parcel of land and soon the thriving community of Calvin (named after the original landowner) was thriving and bustling with activity.

Calvin soon became the center of business and commerce, and swiftly all levels of city and county government moved their offices to this busy and prosperous city. Large, segregated residential areas were also formed, with the majority of the White population establishing their residences around the central business district of the city and African American residents settling in the northern part of the city. With an influx of diversified immigrants moving into the community and surrounding area, the citizens

voted to levy a property tax and establish a public school system for the children of Calvin.

District Background

As an early “graded” and segregated school system, CISD experienced rapid growth and expansion in a relative short period of time due to an expanding railroad system. During the same time period, the city of Calvin also purchased a parcel of land and provided segregated schooling for Black children in the community. As the community of Calvin grew in population numbers, so did populations of White, Hispanic, and African American students. Various segregated school facilities were built through the early- to mid-1900’s in the city of Calvin to accommodate expanding populations, thereby increasing grade levels taught as well as providing differentiation between elementary and secondary schools for Black students.

As schools began to desegregate in the 1960’s, the plan adopted for Calvin ISD desegregation involved one-grade per year integration. The desegregation plan changed unexpectedly and quickly, however, when a district court judge ordered the immediate desegregation of all Calvin students in 1971. Approximately 17 years after the pivotal Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that reversed separate educational facilities for Black and White students, CISD complied with the judge’s order and integrated all races of students into common facilities. Over the course of the last 45 to 50 years as the population has continually grown, student enrollment within CISD has continued to increase, necessitating the construction and addition of numerous schools, facilities, and personnel.

Currently, CISD can be considered a medium-size, urban school district, consisting of 16 elementary and 11 secondary campuses. Two elementary schools are former recipients of National Blue Ribbon awards from the United States Department of Education, and state accountability ratings in 2008 indicate one elementary school is exemplary, while a combination of six elementary and secondary campuses are recognized. District student demographics are composed of approximately 15,000 students in grades early childhood through 12th grade. Students of color (African American and Hispanic) represent approximately 70% of the total student population with the remaining 30% of students representing White ethnicity. Roughly, 70% of the student population is economically disadvantaged and students classified as at-risk exceed 60% of the total student population. As identified on one of the most recent district accountability reports, almost 40% of the total district staff is classified as minority with approximately 20% represented as African American and Hispanic ethnicities, with the remaining 80% of the staff as identified by White ethnicity. Averaging two recent years of data, the student dropout rate has approximated 5%.

Observations and Annotations

As I was driving on the main thoroughfare through the city of Calvin (population 65,000 as determined by the 2000 census), it reminded me of a small town feeling and atmosphere with many of the amenities that anyone could find in a larger city. Specialty restaurants, fast food establishments, convenience stores, and small businesses line the major thoroughfare that runs through the heart of the city. To the west of the thoroughfare, the railroad runs in a parallel direction and actually dissects the historic

downtown section, which like in many small towns and communities, is undergoing various stages of revitalization and redevelopment. Taking a few minutes to drive thorough the downtown section and neighboring side streets, the diverse population of Calvin is evident, if by nothing else than by the names and visible menus of local food businesses that advertise “soul” food cuisine, “Mexican and Tex-Mex” foods, specialized “Italian” pizzerias, as well as “specialty” cafes serving a variety of sandwiches, pastries, and desserts.

Superintendent Background

Arriving approximately 10 minutes early, I walked into the administration building and was greeted by a friendly and welcoming individual at the front desk. After explaining that I had an appointment with the school superintendent, I was directed toward a steep set of stairs that would take me to the second floor. Out of breath and breathing heavy (the stairs really were steep), I reached the second floor landing and opened a set of doors that led me down a long hallway. Seeing the superintendents’ office plaque on the left wall, I entered his assistant’s office and was once again greeted by a friendly smile and pleasant speaking individual.

Hearing my arrival, Ed walked out of the opened doorway leading from his office and greeted me with an energetic handshake. As I followed Ed into his office, I walked through two large double doors and entered into the center of a very large room that contained a large conference table, leather couch and chairs, as well as a number of wall paintings and associated decorations that accentuated thick rich “block” paneling on the room walls. (I remember thinking, “wow, this is a very nice office.”)

Ed's desk, credenza, and computer area were to the right of the room entryway and were covered with stacks of papers and files. Suggesting we sit at the conference table, I took a seat on the side of the table and Ed sat at the "head" of the table. As I began setting up my cassette and digital recorders between us on the conference table, we began discussing my status as a graduate student and my reasoning for using two recording devices. Explaining that although my confidence in the use of the digital recorder was increasing, I was not yet comfortable with not having a back up of the interview. Laughingly, Ed assured me that it was fine to use both.

Ed appeared to be in his early sixties and as we chatted back and forth regarding my research, I could tell not only did he like to talk, but also he was a fast talker, literally. As I began the interview, I jotted down "relaxed and at ease" on my list of interview questions, referencing Ed's demeanor and appearance. I remember thinking I need to minimize the structured interview process. I need to just let Ed talk and let the conversation flow on the basis of general back and forth conversing on my list of topic questions. In retrospect, this technique worked well, although in some instances it led to discussions and conversations that were really outside the bounds of the research in question. I found referencing back to the list of topics and questions "reeled" the conversation back in and served to redirect our dialogues.

Discussing his educational preparation, Ed shared with me the fact that he grew up in Houston, Texas, as a very poor inner city kid. I was actually referencing in my questioning his educational preparation in terms of post-secondary academic work leading to the superintendency, but Ed assumed a more broad approach in his response.

(This is a good example of how some of our conversations would generalize into other questions and responses.) It was through this type of unscripted conversing that Ed communicated some of his most strongly held beliefs, values, and perceptions.

Perceptions of Self and Others

It was actually during one of the “unscripted” conversations that Ed communicated a very strong belief that growing up in a poor family has enabled him as a school administrator to have a greater understanding and increased awareness for his district students and parents in terms of their general attitudes, outlooks, and convictions regarding education and their lack of ability to set high expectations. Through his own inability to set high expectations resulting from a less than privileged childhood, Ed acknowledges the critical importance for setting and maintaining high expectations for his students. Illustrating this point, Ed relates,

I never set them [expectations] high enough and had to reevaluate them as I went along....So many times they don't even realize that they are setting low expectations. You have to look past...where they are coming from and what is going on in their lives....to appreciate their perspectives....The fact that I can look at things coming from a child's perspective, a student perspective has been real helpful to me.

Understanding the importance for setting high expectations, Ed believes his ability to see things from a student perspective has afforded him some degree of appreciation. His specific non-privileged childhood experience he believes has enabled him to understand the expectations and perceptions of many of his students.

Although growing up poor, Ed completed both a bachelor and master's degree in music education and was employed for many years as a band director and teacher.

Desiring to become a principal, Ed entered school administration, as he referenced “the

old fashion way, one step at a time.” He started out as an assistant principal for a junior high school in a considerably large, urban district and then many years later moved into a principal role in a smaller, rural district. It was while serving as an assistant principal that Ed realized the position he wanted was that of high school principal. Until that revelation, he really had no further career aspirations other than achieving the level of high school principal. Only after continued re-evaluation of his own thinking and “ego” appraisal did Ed decide to enter into the superintendency.

Motivation

At every level I looked at people that I worked with and thought you know I can do better than what they’re doing....I think you have to have a healthy ego to be a superintendent....You have to feel like...I can do it well or do it better....It’s an intrinsic thing and that has been a driving force for me.

Acknowledging the desire to want to do a better job and the belief that he could do a better job than the superintendents he observed, motivated Ed to seek the superintendency.

Ed has completed 36 years in education; 23 of those years have been in educational administration, primarily at the secondary principal level. As Calvin ISD school superintendent, Ed is currently serving in his first superintendency and in his fifth year as the district’s educational leader. Ed previously served as high school principal and interim superintendent for Calvin ISD prior to his selection as school superintendent.

District Assessment

I continued our conversation by asking Ed to reflect on the general assessment of student achievement in his district upon his selection and subsequent acceptance of his current position as district superintendent. Curious as to his actions and behaviors that he

might perceive to have existed and subsequently changed, I believed it was important for him to reflect back on his early days and years from a point of contextual reference as a first-year superintendent and then move forward in time to his current assessment, as a fifth-year superintendent.

When I arrived, we were in bad shape. We really had not done any long range planning at all. At that point in time, you could really do a mediocre job and still survive...I came in and changed the administrator structure, moved people around, tried to get the most bang...I picked the people in key people that were instructionally sound, [who] talked about children, what they learned, what they needed so that instruction would drive everything...I changed everything even as interim superintendent. It was pretty arrogant of me to do that, but they [Board] let me do it so I totally changed the administrative structure, moved people around, [and] started working on a curriculum.

It is Ed's belief that when he accepted the position of superintendent in CISD, the district was not doing well in terms of being instructionally focused and supported by individuals who had solid instructional backgrounds. While serving as the interim superintendent and recognizing the need for change, it became obvious to Ed changes within the existing administrative structure needed to occur, and he ultimately and surprisingly was allowed to make them.

Referencing his current assessment of his district, Ed stated,

This is an urban district. We have lots of challenges. We probably have every challenge you can think of in this school district. We have a huge ESL contingency moving in all the time. All of our growth is non-English speaking kids....We have a lot of White flight to a neighboring suburban district, so that's going down and the African Americans are staying about the same and Hispanics are growing, like Texas is and so we reflect Texas. So, a lot of challenges there. We made a lot of progress. We put in a lot of special programs in for kids. Because we have so much diversity in our district, we had to have a lot of diversity in programs. You're not going to find a district that has more programs, more different programs than we do. You won't find it, one in Texas, I can tell ya.

It is apparent that Ed's current assessment of his district is one that is reflective of many challenges associated with an urban, ethnically diverse school system. Attempting to address many of those challenges, Ed believes his district implements a tremendous number of specialized programs that target and attempt to address the diversity of needs of various student populations.

Accountability

In one of our side conversations regarding his current assessment of his district, Ed used the phrase "just getting by." I asked Ed to explain his statement of "just getting by." What did he perceive that statement to imply with regard to accountability?

Back then, it did not take much to be acceptable [referencing state accountability rating]. We are talking about six or seven years ago. You could still make a lot of mistakes and not focus on instruction and kinda ride by and still be acceptable. Some of them [sic] schools were still unacceptable at the time and just made major, major mistakes to do that. For example, like making all the special education students take regular education tests, things like that. They did some of that and so those schools were unacceptable, of course. So, there were some things that were just really no leadership in instruction and instruction was not the focus. They could kinda get by with that but you can't anymore. Things have gotten harder, different clientele that you have to work with more and so it's a whole different ballgame.

Ed continued to summarize his assessment of student achievement and accountability from then to now in the following statements:

We are a lot more focused on student achievement now than they were then. You know, we have a lot more resources at every level regarding student achievement than in the past...I have had to add additional teachers in some schools. They would never do that before. Like the first year I became superintendent, I put seven additional teachers at Calvin Middle School because it had been a low-performing school. They needed help. They needed more resources so I had to go back and add some of those things to focus on instruction.

It is apparent that Ed believes the accountability climate within CISD was considerably different prior to beginning his tenure as school superintendent. Questioning administrative decisions that resulted in lower accountability ratings, a general lack of focus in instructional leadership, and student achievement, Ed believes since becoming superintendent, he has redirected the district to focus on instruction.

Instructional Leadership

As Ed and I continued our discussion regarding student achievement, it became apparent to me that Ed viewed himself as having primary responsibility for instructional leadership and student achievement. With a resounding “Me, the superintendent!” response to my confirmation query, Ed further clarified the importance for not only accepting responsibility but for influencing student achievement. “I am the one that drives it. The superintendent is the instructional leader of the district.” Before Ed could continue, almost without thinking, I interrupted him with a question. I was thinking during his response that it is easy to accept responsibility for positive influence and success, but how about failure? So, having stopped him from responding, I asked Ed as a superintendent and self-professed instructional leader, would he accept failure or fault for a campus being unacceptable?

Sure...as superintendent you are responsible for everything that happens on every campus....Now, does that mean you are going to just run out and fire your superintendent when your schools are low-performing? No, you don't...There is no shame in having a low-performing school. The shame is accepting that and being happy with that.

Ed, as school superintendent, clearly accepts all responsibility as an instructional leader.

At this point in the interview I had pretty much decided that Ed loved to talk and he was enjoying the interview. His responses to my questions were lengthy, and he appeared to like reflecting and talking about his district and his views, very openly and freely. I was somewhat concerned at this point, however, that my request for 45 minutes of his time would not be sufficient to cover my entire list of interview guide questions. I attempted to limit my responses, antidotal comments, and exploratory questioning on particular questions in hopes of facilitating greater time, although in reflection I was not successful.

As I returned our conversation back to student achievement, I asked Ed if he believed he was an effective superintendent and in what particular areas?

Yes [I am an effective superintendent]....Overall you have so many different responsibilities as superintendent that you have to delegate and so I do a good job with that. You have to be visible...very accessible...keep a sense of humor...be the calm one when things go wrong, and I think you have to like...and understand people, their perspective where they are coming from.

Acknowledging he is an effective superintendent, Ed identifies visibility, accessibility, humor, composure, and the ability to appreciate differing perspectives as major attributes.

Having not heard any reference to instructional leadership as an area of effectiveness and not wanting to lead Ed with guiding prompts and responses, I decided at this point just to let Ed talk about, in general, his views on instructional leadership. I asked Ed as an instructional leader what he does on the campus or at the district level in terms of decreasing student achievement inequities and if he could identify a critical factor that he perceives may be impacting his success or failure.

Well, I try to get out but I don't get out every day, but I try to get out about every other day....[What percentage of classrooms do you believe you visit?] Maybe

10%. I walk around the building and say hello....I just try to be visible in the schools. A lot of times I will go into the teacher's workrooms or go have lunch with them in the cafeteria. Those kinds of things. I think that is the important thing....They are dependent on me to be the moral booster...[In terms of effectiveness] I got principals and assistant principals that can be in those classrooms and watch those lessons.

[The critical factor for decreasing student achievement gaps relies on] I think parent support, the home situation. We are just a reflection of what is going on in society and when the family is falling apart, we reap the benefits of that in school too. I think that is got to be huge! If we had more intact families where they put a value on education, that would be huge, huge!

Admitting his belief in visibility as an instructional leader as being important, Ed maintains in terms of overall effectiveness, campus administrators have primary responsibilities for those duties. Ed furthermore maintains differences in student performance are the primary responsibilities and result as a fault of society in general, student families, and the home environment.

Upon further conversing on the topic of instructional leadership, Ed explained his perception of an instructional leader.

It's a person where instruction drives everything. Anytime you make a decision, that is the first thing that you look at....Like for every time you make a decision how is this going to impact students instruction wise....So, the principal is the instructional leader on every campus and so by supporting them as that, then that's what I do as an instructional leader. I make sure they are always doing the best thing for the student instructionally and so it goes from the top down and then back up.

Ed suggests that instructional leadership is a primary, multi-faceted process and is facilitated through the use of a top-down model of management in his district.

In terms of supporting the principals and their efforts, Ed made reference in an earlier side bar statement to putting a tremendous amount of pressure on his principals. So much so, that while serving as a principal, he noticed that some of the pressure was

being exerted by individuals within the organization who were not instructionally focused. He noticed for instance, the transportation director, the finance director, and the special education director all had agendas that were not focusing on the instructional success of each particular campus. Because of that, Ed indicated that even while an interim superintendent, he

switched things around and said that's not the way it ought to be. Everybody should be working for that school. So, to keep the tail from wagging the dog...my principals do evaluations...to the extent [that] 60% of everybody's evaluation in the central office is done by the principals....So, everybody feels like they work for the principal and that principal works for that school.

It was apparent to Ed as interim superintendent that within CISD, district level and ancillary support functions were not in alignment with his perceptions of an instructionally focused district, and he began to change them.

Success

It was also during this conversation that Ed also revealed once again the importance for the superintendent to communicate high expectations for success regularly with his principals and to have meetings to discuss “what needs to be done differently, different pedagogies, programs, whatever.”

Like I said, it's just as not as far as test scores, just overall improvement in academics and the value you place on that, how important that is. You always make sure that everybody, you're always talking about instruction, improving instruction, always talking about instruction.

Stating lesser importance for accountability, Ed believes academic improvement is of more significance in communicating high expectations for instructional leadership for his campus principals.

Ed had provided his views on instructional leadership and his vision of success for his principals but not for his students. When I asked him to explain his vision of success for his students, Ed replied,

I want to prepare the kids for after school for a vocation. I want to make them a successful citizen. I want them to be able to support themselves and their families. That does not mean they are all going to college. I am a firm believer in vocational programs, and we want to prepare them to have those skills where they can cope ...I believe that! So, my goal is to have happy, successful students that can be successful in life and can actually like I said can contribute to society and support their self, [and] families. I think that is so important. It is not about going to college; it's the whole situation.

Recognizing that not all students are college bound, Ed maintains his view that vocational programming and preparing kids with skills to become successful, productive citizens are his goals. Attempting to clarify his vision of success, I asked Ed if his statements and beliefs might be perceived as setting low expectations for his students. Numerous state and federal programs, grants, and initiatives could appear to suggest that all students should seek a four-year, post-secondary education.

Well, if they want to go to college, that's fine, don't say and don't demean vocational educational and all those other things too....There are school districts that say everybody ought to go to college, and when I say that I am talking about a four-year academic college and if you don't do that, you're not successful. I don't think that is realistic. I don't think that is right.

Student success from Ed's perspective is inclusive of vocational programs outside of the traditional academic preparation normally associated with students desiring to attend post-secondary institutions.

Expectations

Our conversation had returned back to the setting of high expectations and goals. Ed had previously communicated his strong belief and importance for the setting of high

academic goals and for maintaining high expectations of success for his students and principals, but I was curious if it was Ed's opinion these same high expectations also were communicated and adhered to by principals and teachers on his campuses. Was it Ed's perception his principals and their teachers should maintain high expectations for their students? With regard to his principals, "they need to set the mark high as well and always do what is in the best interest of his students, not anyone else." Ed further explains,

Their [principals] number one priority just like mine has got to be what is in the best interest of the students....If they start doing what is best for the teacher, or for themselves and what is in the best interest of the student after that, that just can't happen. That just can't happen.

Maintaining the importance for prioritizing, Ed maintains principals must adhere to a basic precept for doing what is in the best interest of students. Defaulting and giving consideration to any other issue or concern must not be allowed to occur.

Providing an example of his point, Ed referenced a particular situation involving one of his elementary principals of a low-performing campus. The principal analyzed her data and discovered that the low-performing campus accountability rating was the result of only three or four kids missing the standard in writing performance. The principal indicated that her best writing teacher did not want to teach writing and so she, the principal, allowed her to teach another subject. In hindsight, had she not allowed the teacher to teach another subject, those three or four students might not have performed so poorly with a weaker teacher, and her low-performing campus accountability rating might have been prevented. My principal, Ed remarked, "took what was best for that teacher over what was best for those kids."

Setting high expectations was an area of interest that Ed felt was of major importance for not only students and principals but teachers and other instructional staff members as well. Discussing if differences should exist for different populations regarding setting expectations, Ed communicated very strongly in his response that although there has been a tremendous amount of discussion in this area,

No...I think you do them [students] a disservice by doing that. You really need to get those prejudices, get those things out of the way....That is not always easy to do....So many times they [teachers, and instructional staff members] don't even realize that they are setting lower expectations for different kids. Now, different kids learn differently and especially lower socio-economic kids learn differently so it takes a better teacher to teach those kids because you have to be more creative and understanding.

It is apparent, Ed is acknowledging an unconscious awareness of biases and prejudices by teachers and other staff members in regard to setting low expectations for some of their students. It would also appear Ed is suggesting that while recognizing lower socio-economic kids learn differently, there is an implication the quality of teaching must be superior to that of other, more privileged students.

Achievement

I asked Ed in his assessment of the large discrepancies between African American and Hispanic student performance, might those biases, prejudices, and quality of teaching that he previously referenced be a factor?

It's not so much Hispanics and African Americans as it is low socio-economic and higher socio-economic. It's everything from having two parents at home, to a parent being supportive, putting a higher value on education. It has to do with how much time they can invest in their kids to help them with their education and how important....It's poor kids; it's single parent families. It's those kind of things where they don't come from a home that has high expectations for them.

Negating ethnicity, Ed believes differences in student performance are attributed to differences in socio-economic affluence within the home, parental support, and involvement and value in their child's education.

As a follow-up question, I provided Ed with TAKS scores from 2003-2008 accountability reports for all tests taken and compared African American students' performance to their White peers. During this time period, a 36 to 41% achievement gap persisted. I asked Ed to comment on the discrepancy between the two populations.

I think they are probably getting better. Imagine that if you look at both the White and African Americans are improving....I am not sure the gap is because they are African American or low socio-economic. Most of those kids are going to be low socio-economic you know. There is always the argument of low expectations. Is there low expectations? I am sure there is even if unintended in a lot of cases. So, you have that, but I do not have a good explanation for that.

In an attempt to address the referenced achievement gap, Ed believes his scores are increasing, although he really does not have a good explanation as to the cause of the persistent achievement discrepancy.

Continuing to explore the achievement gap incongruity, I shared with Ed his Hispanic TAKS scores for all tests taken from the same period of time as previously referenced with his African American students. Hispanic student scores in comparison to their White counterparts produced a 22% to 29% achievement gap between the two groups. Asking once again, for his thoughts, Ed replied,

I think you are making a real simple analogy to that. I would imagine the Hispanic population is going way up while the White population is going down....But at the same time, the White scores are going up and the Hispanic scores are going up at the same time. If the White scores were not going up, you would see it close, but we are working with everybody. Now, we are putting a lot more resources with our low level kids for sure. I tell you what would be interesting is to look at

our White kids and White kids from [neighboring district] and see how they compare. Compare them and see how they score.

As Ed completed the last sentence of his response I just jotted down “?????” by the question, to reference my lack of understanding with his response. His response made very little sense to me and was confusing. I thought the introduction of “White student comparisons with a neighboring district” response might be a conscious attempt to divert our discussion away from the question posed. (Upon later reflection, I believe Ed was attempting to explain a testing limitation known as a ceiling effect, in which as individuals improve toward a maximum value or score, it becomes more difficult to reach.) Perhaps, I was making a simple analogy to a difficult set of truths, but the fact prevailed; an achievement gap did and still does exist between Hispanic and White students in Calvin ISD, and I was not ready to let his answer suffice.

Attempting one more time to illicit a comprehensible response regarding the noted achievement gaps, I took a different approach. I suggested to Ed that if we looked at both African American and Hispanic achievement gaps, his Hispanic student population was actually achieving at performance levels closer to their White peers. He had previously referenced the tremendous diversity and quantity of programs that existed within his district, so I asked him if he believed there were more programs in his district targeting Hispanic students and perhaps they were actually more effective in comparison to the number and quantity of programs that existed for his African American students.

Yes, yes. We have more programs....No doubt about that, so you got a lot of new immigrants and they tend to work hard. I see that a lot. A lot of times you see that more than in our naturalized citizens; Hispanic or Whites....We sorta call ourselves the Ellis Island of Texas; sometimes because we have a direct route to Mexico... the work ethic is unbelievable in those kids.

Communicating his belief that immigrant Hispanic students maintain a harder work ethic than others, Ed perceives his district has more targeted programs that are effective in comparison to their African American peers. The combination of comments regarding achievement expressed by Ed highlights the masking of power and privilege and negation of ethnicity by the dominant White culture: theme number 5.

Values and Work Ethics

Questioning Ed why he believed Hispanic students immigrating to this country and to his district exhibited a harder work ethic than many of their naturalized peers he responded,

I think because they come from a poor background, they appreciate the fact they have so much more when they come to America, and they see the American dream as something they see they can attain. The parents, you have a lot of parents even though they don't speak English, they want a better life for their kids and they're very supportive in that way as much as they can.

It appears to me that Ed is implying that new immigrants have a differing perspective and values for an American education.

The subject of parental support precipitated my requesting of Ed to reflect on his earlier statements regarding the lack of parental support with his African American students and if he believed they communicated a lesser value for education to their children?

I think you get some of that. I think that is a factor for a lot of our low socio-economic kids/parents. They want them old enough to get up and get a job and have kids early on. They are teenage parents. You get a lot of that. You have a lot of grandparents raising kids, especially a lot of African American single parents. A lot of absent fathers. Lots of that.

Ed appears to be suggesting low socio-economic African American parents encourage their children to procreate early and have a differing value of education as predicated by single parenthood and absent parental figures. In terms of a difference in African American work ethic, Ed believes and has the perception that

I know the hardest kids we get to work with, to be successful are the African Americans, African American males. That's the hardest ones. That's the hardest ones because we see kids that do really well in elementary school and are proud of that, but by the time they get to secondary school, they are not proud of that. [Why?] It's a social thing...in a lot of cases when you get to high school, you run two schools in one....Your White kids are in your AP classes; your IB classes, your upper level classes, and your African Americans are in your regular classes. Trying to get those kids in those classes is tough sometimes; they don't want to do it. They get a lot of pressure from their friends not to.

In these statements Ed seemed to be saying differences in work ethics between White, African Americans, and Hispanic students result in the selection of less rigorous courses and educational programming suggesting that the district must differentiate its course offerings and “tracking” for students of color. Additionally, it appears to me, Ed's comments and beliefs regarding student achievement, values, and work ethics indicate a general lack of importance for educational achievement and accomplishment for some of his students, those primarily of low socio-economic and students of color: theme number 6.

Equity

In an earlier conversation, Ed responded that low academic performance with students of color he attributed to low socioeconomic status. Incorporating both of these beliefs, I conveyed to Ed that there are other districts (referencing Meadow Park and Pine Forest school districts) that have even larger populations of students of color performing

at higher levels of academic achievement with even greater percentages of economically disadvantaged populations than in his district. What did he believe to be or not to be happening in his district regarding children of color from low-income homes persistently underperforming similar children in other referenced districts?

We visited [district name identifier changed to Pine Forest] several times. In fact, we patterned several things after them. You know I do not know how [district name identifier changed to Meadow Park] is now, but there was a time that you had two years to be recognized and if not you lose your job. With the pressure they put on teachers, you gonna have a turnover. You may have a principal stay there for two years and then they're gone. I have never taken that attitude...so I don't think I would want to work in a place like that, that sets limits like that where you become recognized or I don't care how you do it you better become recognized. Referencing statements of "just can't remember," "I don't remember" and "I can't answer that intelligently."

Ed could not provide any additional insight as to what might be happening in Calvin ISD in regard to lower academic performance for children of color and low socio-economic status.

Ed, almost in contradiction to his earlier response, indicated when questioned on identifying any specific obstacles to equitable student achievement replied with specific references to two unacceptable campuses in his district. The death of a principal in the middle of the year in one instance and the lack of high expectations by the principal and his staff were attributed to the second. Explaining further:

Referencing the two unacceptable campuses] One of them the principal died in the middle of the year. It was awful. It was just awful. That was kind of an anomaly you know just a bad situation and she was trying as hard as she could and she really felt like they were going to make it. The other one...we just fell down and you know I just don't think he [the principal] had high expectations for his teachers. They [teachers] need to put the time or do whatever they need to do, and if they do not have the resources, they need to ask for it. I do not think they always ask for what they need, and the expectations were not as high as they

should have been. You have to raise that anxiety level sometimes and I did not feel that principal was doing that.

The identification of obstacles to student achievement by Ed interestingly, appears to focus on campus principals, by the maintaining of high expectations and raising the level of anxiety of their teachers.

In reference to raising the level of anxiety, I asked several questions throughout the interviews that focused on Ed's perception of anxiety as a result of state and federal accountability. Two particular areas of questioning centered on Ed's general level of anxiety created by accountability mandates and his feelings of accomplishments regarding student performance in his district.

I think it has nothing to do with test scores, really. It has to do with helping students be successful...after they get out of school whether that is the military, college, vocational schools, whatever. That's the greatest success you can have with students....It's not about test scores. [Referencing any change in feeling or beliefs as a result of accountability] I have never felt any differently. No, no. The state comes across feeling differently. I've never felt any differently. You know these things; the pendulum swings one-way this four or five years and swings the other for four or five years. Test scores will come and go. Tests will come and go. The tests are not what people value in schools. That's not what they like. They like the fact they are in football or in band or they are getting a good science education, whatever you know, but there is something else that is important to them...not tests scores.

These statements suggested that accountability did not appear to bring to bear any level of anxiety nor did they suggest any level of significance to Ed, so during my follow-up questioning, I suggested to Ed that he could be perceived as demonstrating a general lack of concern or importance for federal and state accountability.

Well, don't take me too literally. Obviously I lay awake, I worry about tests and I am concerned about them...it drives a lot of what I do. [Such as?] Okay, look at what we are doing with the Flex calendar...summer school program. Every kid that is on grade level and successful on TAKS goes home seven days early and

we keep the rest of them. That way we get the really best teachers to work with those kids. We gave seven extra days of summer school with our very best teachers to work with small groups, one-on-one to get them ready for the next round of testing and to be more successful on their grades.

While Ed maintains only a small degree of state and federal accountability pressure is present, it appears by his example of the Flex calendar that district programs and activities are reflective to some degree of their influence. Throughout the interview process, Ed repeatedly referenced the belief in his abilities to assess individual situations, take different perspectives or outlooks, and be open to suggestions from others. Having communicated these attributes, I queried Ed as to how these attributes may have improved or affected equitable student performance. Over the course of two interviews, Ed communicated two contrasting views:

[Inclusionary viewpoint]...it's just you whole philosophy of believing that everybody can be successful. Every student can learn, improve. It's making sure you're not exclusionary, that you're inclusive of everybody and that you encourage kids and teachers. Your philosophy just blends down into everything.

[Exclusionary viewpoint]...you can't get tied up with yourself sometimes. I have kids come in and they're so far behind that I say ya know just go get your GED.... By not being more realistic and trying to help them be successful in life is a lot more important whether you are trying to help them get into the military or vocational school or whatever.

These two contrasting viewpoints suggest to me philosophical inconsistencies and contradictions regarding Ed's ability to achieve equitable student performance while aiding and abetting an inequity consciousness with all district stakeholders. In my estimation, Ed's contrasting views are serving as obstacles to student achievement and success: theme number 7.

District Departing Thoughts

As I left the office that afternoon and sat down in my car away from the gaze and watchful eyes of Ed, one of the first things that came to my mind that I jotted down was programs. I jotted down, “Ed was all about programs.” Several weeks later, as I transcribed the interviews, the significance of that statement hit me. Transcribing Ed’s comments on his personal held values and beliefs affecting equitable student achievement, Ed responded with, in part, the following statement:

Somebody told me once that if you think you can do one size fits all and you’re trying to do that, then you’re really in for it for yourself, but if you try to come up with something that is going to fix a kid one at a time, then you’re in for it for the children.

As I typed that statement as part of the transcription process, I could not help but ponder, whether programs were Ed’s “one size fits all” attempts to address education inequities. Was Ed “in it” for himself or truly for the children of his district? As I reflected for a moment, I remembered an earlier statement Ed made in response to questioning of his motivation for accepting his current position as Calvin ISD superintendent. “You want to make a bigger impact, especially as you get older, you really want to leave a legacy. You want to do something that you leave behind.” Is persistent underachievement for children of color and children from low-income homes in Calvin ISD, Ed’s legacy? Is Ed leaving behind those same students? Some individuals would say Ed’s legacy is alive and well in Calvin ISD.

Thematic Summary

The following themes were identified as a result of two, in-depth interviews with Ed:

5. Race neutrality and equal access mask power and privilege,
6. A lack of value for educational achievement and success is precipitated by marginalization and subordination of students of color, and
7. Superintendent views serve as obstacles to achievement and success.

As in the previous chapter, thematic discussions, recommendations, and conclusions will be presented in Chapter VII.

(It should be noted the first superintendent nominated by Paul to serve as my third study participant elected after the first interview not to respond to multiple email communications and numerous phone calls regarding completion of the second interview. He was subsequently dropped from study inclusion and another participant was nominated and contacted.)

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS: RIVERVIEW INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

We talk a lot about [this city] having so much potential and all the things we want [this city] to be but then when you really get down to it, people really don't believe that we can be. Everyone really has low expectations. This is a town where people drop their dirty diapers in the parking lot. This is a dirty town. We were dirty yesterday; we are dirty today. This town is going to be dirty tomorrow. (Superintendent, Riverview ISD 2009)

Historical Background

Riverview Independent School District (RISD) is a large urban school district located in the one of the largest cities in the state. The city itself is comprised of several smaller, distinct communities that many people confuse with independent municipalities that maintain their own unique identities and characteristics associated with their ethnicities and cultures. Riverview is a city comprised of more than 250,000 residents, which represent approximately 65% African American, Hispanic, and Asian ethnicities, with the remaining 35% of individuals identified as White.

As with many early Texas communities, the city of Riverview has a rich and diverse history. Early inhabitants of the area were various tribes of the migratory Karankawa Indian group that roamed the region fishing and hunting. Early European explorers are credited with colonizing the region in the early 1800's after numerous previous attempts by Spanish explorers failed in the late 1600's and 1700's, as a result of famine and drought. Throughout the 1800's, Riverview inhabitants struggled with epidemics, lack of fresh water, and numerous battles with Mexican armies. During the Texas Revolution, Riverview served as a supply station and during the Civil War, was a pivotal site for Confederate commerce involving shipping and trading operations.

District Background

In 1845, Riverview established its first school and employed its first teacher. Throughout the 1850's and 1860's, short-lived private schools and academies originated for boys and girls. All ethnicities were allowed to attend; however, gender and ethnicity determined the type of education (academic versus vocational) and specifically the length of school day.

Prior to the Texas Legislature officially establishing public schools in 1871, the city of Riverview continued to allow educational access for all students through the management of two school systems: free (serving the poor and indigent) and public (serving those that could afford private fees and tuition regulated by public law). During the late 1800's, racial educational segregation was created in Riverview by land bequeaths and construction of two separate side-by-side public schools: one for Black and Hispanic students and the other for White students. Similar to most early Texas cities, the extension of the railroad to Riverview not only linked the surrounding cattle industry to markets and industries farther north but also was a major contributor to the city's continued growth and expansion.

In the early 1900's, the Texas Legislature officially founded RISD, which consisted of approximately 1600 students, four elementary schools, and one high school at that time. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the city of Riverview continued to experience both tremendous hardship with natural disasters and expansive population growth, while continuing to be promoted as a year round resort city. Diversification of industries associated with newly discovered oil and natural gas deposits, as well as

production and manufacturing of agricultural goods provided the city of Riverview with a steady increase in population growth and RISD with a steady increase in student populations. Due to the large number of students, RISD maintained a half-day school schedule that continued for over two decades in which students attended either morning or afternoon sessions.

Ironically, a district that was originally founded on providing educational access for all students, 14 years later after school segregation was declared unconstitutional, RISD had not complied with federal desegregation laws and still segregated Mexican American and African American students from White peers. Subsequent court legal interpretation and mandated participatory district intervention in 1968 resulted in the desegregation of all students in RISD.

Today, as a large urban school district, RISD consists of more than 60 schools with the largest percentage of schools (approximately 70%) represented by elementary campuses. The remaining 30% of schools are composed of campuses encompassing secondary and specialized schools. Approximately, 40,000 students are enrolled in early childhood through twelfth grades. Students of color represent approximately 85% of the total student population with the remaining 15% identified by White ethnicity. Greater than 60% are economically disadvantaged and more than 50% are classified as at-risk students with approximately 5% of students dropping out of school each year. As identified on one of the most recent district accountability reports, over half the staff is made up of individuals of color (African American, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander, with the remaining percentage of individuals identified as White.

Having traveled to and through Riverview on several occasions, I was not entirely looking forward to the experience. Not to mention a long drive, but my experiences were that of probably many other individuals when traveling from a rural area to a large urban city-traffic, traffic, and more traffic. Luckily, I had set my interview appointment for early afternoon, which afforded me an opportunity to drive around the city and into some of the neighborhoods and areas that I had researched.

Observations and Annotations

Driving in from the east as I approached the city of Riverview, I observed many large industrial complexes, refineries, and various types of storage facilities. As I looked around and surveyed the surrounding landscape, it was obvious the area was heavily industrialized with spotted commercial businesses that supported nearby industries and production facilities. As I continued to drive toward the downtown area, I noticed several tourist landmarks and attractions that bustled with activity.

As I entered the outskirts of the downtown section of Riverview, I ignored my Global Positioning System (GPS) that was telling me to exit and continued to drive deeper into the downtown area. I had time to kill and wanted to explore the city. That's one thing good thing about a GPS, I could always find my way back easily, regardless of where in the city I went. As I drove around in the downtown area, I saw a mix of old and new buildings, some closed down and boarded up, while others were freshly painted and occupied. Large skyscrapers draped smaller, older buildings of an earlier era. I noted various styles of building architectures what I assumed to be representative of the city's historical and diverse ethnic cultures.

The nearby residential neighborhood that bordered the downtown area contained a mixture of homes that represented previous great wealth and prosperity. Many of the homes (both large and small) had undergone various stages of repair and renovations while other adjacent homes reflected neglect and disrepair. This was also an area in which some homes had evidently been demolished and replaced with newer homes due to the proximity and location to the downtown area. Occasionally as I drove down the streets, I spotted a few individuals dotting in and out of their cars or homes, but this was Texas, in the middle of July, at approximately twelve noon and, therefore, very hot. Not many people were visible outside in their yards or on the streets during this time of day. As I circled back to numerous “recalculating” GPS audio directions, I approached a fast food restaurant near the downtown area. I grabbed my field journal to record my observations and then took a few minutes to eat, note, and reflect upon my observations before my first interview. The RISD administration building was but a few hundred yards away.

At this point, I am going to deviate from continuing with the first interview observations to highlight the drastic contrast of my observational experiences prior to the second interview. While traveling on the same six-lane highway that I had traveled the week before, I witnessed a horrific and serious car accident that resulted in my involvement and assistance. While traveling westbound at approximately 70 miles per hour, a small compact car traveling eastbound swerved for an unknown reason and began flipping across the three lanes of traffic between the car in front of me and my car.

Narrowly missing striking my car, I swerved onto the side of road and saw the compact car land in the median between the frontage road and my lanes of traffic. The car had flipped three times before coming to rest on the grassy median. Jumping out of my car, I ran to the compact car to hear a woman screaming and moaning and a small boy crying in the car. All of the windows had been broken out of the rear and sides of the car and a caved in roof had shattered the front window. Unable to open the door from the drivers' side of the car, I could see the woman was severely injured and bleeding from what looked like a head and face injury.

Another Good Samaritan had approached from the frontage road and was able to remove the small boy from the car and jumped inside to aid the woman as I assisted in aiding the woman through the open window. As blood continued to gush from her wounds, I ran back to my car and grabbed a towel from my trunk to aid in stopping her bleeding. Calming the small boy at this point, and awaiting the police and ambulance, the woman appeared to go in and out of consciousness and would occasionally moan and ask about her son.

Finally, police and ambulance personnel arrived and using the Jaws of Life, the woman was cut out of the car. She and the small boy were carefully placed on stretchers and taken away. It was a terrible accident and one that allowed just enough time for me to arrive at the administration office for the second interview.

I mention these facts, as during the second interview, I had to stop and take a short break. During the second interview immediately following the accident, the superintendent had noticed something was wrong. I started sweating profusely,

coughing, and had a feeling of nausea in my stomach. My concentration was broken and during the interview, I had to rely on my pre-established questions to guide me through the questioning. After a short break, I completed the interview and sat in my car for a few minutes attempting to relax before beginning the long journey home.

As I reflect on this whole experience, as a researcher, I probably should have rescheduled the second interview, but I was really unaware of the extent in which this accident had affected me. Even though the superintendent commented on my depth, complexity, and level of questioning during the second interview, my follow-up questioning outside of the guiding questions I feel was weak. However, I do feel I was able to extend my body of research with the questions and responses that I did receive.

Returning the narrative back to the first initial interview, upon entering the multi-story, downtown administration building, I had to look for someone to assist me in locating the superintendents' office. On the first floor, near the front entrance, large signs acknowledged various departments and offices of individuals, but I did not see the superintendents' office. Stopping someone walking nearby wearing what I assumed was an RISD badge, I asked for directions and was directed upstairs to the second floor, and to the right and back of the escalators.

Exiting from the second floor escalator, I noticed a small sign indicating the general direction of the superintendents' office. As I neared the vicinity, two individuals greeted me and introduced themselves as individuals that I had spoken with on several occasions during the securing and confirming of interview dates and times. Smiling and offering me something to drink, I was instructed to wait on a nearby coach until the

superintendent could see. After a short wait, the superintendent walked out of his office to greet me with a smile and a handshake. I noted my first impressions: personable, friendly, and an individual who appeared to be at ease with the interview situation. I would like to also note that during my subsequent second interview, I believe those same attributes continued to be present with the same wait, greet, and smile with a handshake occurring.

Both interviews were to be conducted in the superintendents' office. A rather large office, with a nice couch, two chairs, and coffee table was on one side of the room and a rather large desk, shelves, and cabinetry were on the opposite back wall. The office was nicely decorated, and I noticed small mementos and pictures on the walls and tables of the room. The south side of the room had large windows, which had lightly colored draperies allowing for just the right amount of sunlight to penetrate the room, giving an afternoon warmth and glow to the room.

Gesturing that I sit on the couch, Paul sat in one of the chairs facing me. As I began taking out my journal and setting up my recorder, we chatted briefly about my research and graduate status and he informed me that he, too, was working on a doctorate at a nearby university. He hoped to complete his coursework this year and was in the process of writing his first chapter in preparation of his research proposal.

Before starting the recorder, I expressed to Paul my appreciation for agreeing to participate in my research study and reminded him that all of our conversations would be kept confidential and he had the right to decline to answer any question that I may pose. He nodded and acknowledged that he understood that option was available. A neatly

groomed man, Paul looked to be in his mid to late 40's. Sitting across from me in conservatively dressed slacks, shirt, and tie, Paul personified my visual interpretation of a "typical" school superintendent: White, middle-aged, conservative professional.

Superintendent Background

Paul, over the expanse of a 19-year tenure with RISD taught for five years as an elementary teacher and then moved into central administration after completing a master's degree in curriculum and instruction. Having no desire to become a campus principal, he held numerous positions in central administration before accepting an outside consulting position that afforded him an opportunity to work with urban districts around the country. Over a seven-year time span, Paul worked in various advisory capacities, assisting urban superintendents, school boards, and union presidents in working with diverse student populations. Having an opportunity to return to the district as assistant superintendent, Paul returned to RISD and one year later was tapped as district superintendent. In all, Paul has 19 years of experience in RISD, 4 of which have been at the superintendent level.

Motivation

When questioned on his personal motivation for becoming a school superintendent, Paul communicated it was not really a career goal to become a superintendent. Acknowledging, upon his return as assistant superintendent, the superintendent was "on his way out," Paul still believed he would work for whoever the new superintendent might be. Only after a superintendent search failed to secure a candidate, was he asked by the school board to accept the position as school

superintendent. Upon his acceptance as Paul states, “the district was not doing well and so I was motivated by the opportunity to be superintendent and maybe see some things through to fruition.” In reference to the district not doing well, Paul expanded on his statements of district performance regarding student achievement upon his acceptance of the position of superintendent.

Oh, it was slipping a lot. If you measure that by TAKS scores as one indicator, the achievement gap had been widening among student groups here for a while, and then overall student achievement and performance was not keeping up with the pace of other similar districts in terms of improvement within our accountability system. At the time I came, we had several schools that were on the verge of becoming academically unacceptable....The general sense within the district, and I think revealed by the data, and SAT scores were declining and the general sense of the district in terms of how our performance was if you look at the data was that we were going in the wrong direction.

In addition to low student academic performance, widening achievement gaps, and a number of schools on the verge of being deemed academically unacceptable by the state accountability system, Paul also communicated,

There was a lot of inconsistency on our campuses in terms of standards of practice for teachers. The principals described it as, we were not going to get any leadership from central office during this period of so many different people coming through on the instructional side of the house so we just sorta circled up the wagons and tried to figure out on our own what to do. That is how they would describe the environment.

Demonstrative of Paul’s general sense for a lack of instructional leadership from central office, his perceived views of his principals are illustrative of inconsistencies that suggest a sense and degree of instructional isolation and separation was occurring on individual campuses and within teacher classrooms.

In reference to Paul’s comment “of so many different people on the instructional side of the house,” he shared with me that upon his return as assistant superintendent for

instruction, there had been four assistant superintendents for instruction in two years. Paul, accepting the assistant superintendent position, hoped to bring some stability and curriculum expertise back to the district. Witnessing firsthand many things, started, stopped, started, stopped, as well as new things brought in by each new assistant superintendent, he felt he could do a better job.

Effectiveness

Paul's willingness to want to do better guided me in my questioning on his beliefs as an experienced superintendent regarding acceptance of personal responsibility and his perceptions of himself as both an effective superintendent and instructional leader.

[Long pause] Uummmm....Yeah I think....I'm a pretty good superintendent. I think I am effective. I mean the goals that we sat out to accomplish, we accomplished under my leadership...I think I am a very effective instructional leader. My background as a teacher and my experience in curriculum development...I think probably feel more confident as a superintendent in curriculum and instruction than some other superintendents.

Acknowledging his view of himself as a very effective instructional leader, Paul appears to me to suggest his curriculum development and teaching experiences have facilitated his assessment.

Following up with Paul on his statements of effectiveness, I reminded him of earlier statements in which he referenced that he was not the "go to person" if teachers or principals wanted to talk about improving student achievement, and in terms of his acceptance of personal responsibility for student achievement, he replied, "We have a great team. I show up at meetings. That's all I do." I asked Paul to help me understand

the connection between his perception of an effective instructional leader (less participatory in my judgment) and student achievement in his district. He responded,

I believe people perceive me as being an effective instructional leader based on my experience in the past and what I have demonstrated here in this district, my history, and the roles I have had here. I believe the public or people in the public aren't going to be looking to talk to the [assistant superintendent for instruction] about instructional issues; they are going to be looking at me to talk about that. So, my statement in the first interview about the perception of me as an effective instructional leader probably is shaped more by how I think the public perceives me and it might be different for a superintendent like many of my colleagues that have a lot more experience in finance and running the business end than I did. I think that differentiates me. Internally, on a day-to-day basis, they look to [name identifier omitted] as chief academic officer to answer any questions and be their "go to person."

Paul differentiates himself from other superintendents by his belief that tenure and experience within RISD has abetted his ability to be an effective instructional leader.

Several of Paul's comments seem to suggest that public perception of instructional leadership differs from the actual, internalized view held by others within his organization.

Contribution

Being more specific and direct in my questioning regarding his belief in personal accountability and his role in the organization, I asked Paul to identify what he believed to be his greatest contribution to improving student achievement and decreasing student inequities. Placing a tremendous amount of emphasis on building a successful central office team, (theme number 8), he relayed a general philosophy of central office support that relied heavily on experience and success as a building principal.

Ironically, acknowledging he had never been a building principal, his goal was to bring in "really good folks here around me" in the central office that were successful

leaders, principals at the campus level. It was this communicated belief in successful building principal leadership that assisted him in “getting the right team in place” as well as redefined and reorganized central office support for individual campuses. Paul states,

I brought in an assistant superintendent for school leadership who was a successful principal at the elementary, middle, and high school level in this district; knows everything up and down this whole organization. We now have those school directors like I said before, only one person had actually been a successful principal, we now have five people who have been very successful principals working in that role who are actually mentoring those principals now. I brought in a new chief financial officer....So, it is really about getting the right team in place.

In the preceding comments, it is very clear that Paul delineates the importance for leadership to encompass successful experiences and tenures as school principals as critical components of central office reorganization.

In a similar response to questioning of specifically his contribution to improving student achievement, Paul states,

Everything that we have accomplished here has been completely dependent on this team....I think my leadership has been the contributing factor...The ability to come in and assemble the right team...a significant factor....Yeah, I brought something to the table [the ability to assemble the right team] but the most important thing that I brought was them.

It appeared the preceding and previous statements suggested Paul was hierarchically and organizationally removed from the day-to-day interaction with his campuses and relied heavily on his administrative team. As a professed instructional leader, how could he have any direct effect on student achievement and performance? How could he maintain he was an effective instructional leader? I was baffled! Specifically asking if individuals within and outside his organization sought his advice or direction regarding student performance and school improvement, Paul responded,

People seek my advice about a lot of things, but I do not know that I am the first person. If someone is going to want to talk about improving student achievement, the way our organization is set up they are going to want to talk to one of the two assistant superintendents....People in the community call on me a lot to talk about...now I do a lot of public speaking about what we need to do to improve our schools. Not to improve TAKS scores but how to improve the environment where students are engaged in meaningful work and be able to learn for life. I am really not interested much in talking about TAKS scores. [Why?] Because if I talk about TAKS scores, the state is already talking about them. I do not need anybody else talking about TAKS scores because everybody else is going to talk about them. So, my position on it is that TAKS scores are an indicator of something, but that is not the end that we are pursuing. The end is not a particular test score.

Achievement

Paul's collective responses did not appear to suggest he accepted nor directed student achievement and accountability, but rather defaulted to the team or specific individuals within his team. It was the "distance" between the positions of superintendent and effective instructional leader that intrigued me at this point. It occurred to me, Paul was maintaining some degree of isolation and remoteness associated with his capacity for instructional leadership and student achievement regarding federal and state accountability at the central office level. I remember thinking, if Paul is actually defaulting to other individuals within his organization for instructional leadership and support, how does that translate down to his campuses? What was happening at the campus level? Asking Paul to direct his comments toward the campus level and integrate his beliefs with "non-negotiables" in terms of his core beliefs regarding student achievement, he explained his capacity for instructional leadership and influence. Paul explained,

The principals in terms of who works in this organization, the 62 principals in this school district, they are the most, they are the lynch pins for everything that we do here. Somebody might say that's kinda weird. Shouldn't it be the teachers

because the teachers are the ones closest to the kids? Well, that's true, where it happens is in the classroom, but in terms of moving things in this organization, I cannot touch 5,000 employees. I personally as superintendent cannot, but I can have a personal relationship with those 62 principals that essentially are the connection to a two-sided funnel. We have stuff that comes from all of these different departments, from the school board, from TEA, from the community, all of that stuff gets filtered through those 62 people who then have to translate that out to the employees and kids at their own schools. If momma ain't happy, nobody is happy, and so it is a nonnegotiable for me that we focus on making them as effective as possible. Part of that is how we develop them professionally and part of that is just getting the hell out of the way so they can do their job.

As Paul referenced and continued to maintain, principals were the central factor (theme #9) in his organization and were often referenced as the critical link between campus effectiveness, student achievement, and instructional leadership, especially in schools failing to meet state and federal accountability standards. Within the past three years, five schools had state ratings of academically unacceptable and ten schools had failed to meet federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards.

Accountability

Paul referenced a combination of factors contributed to and lead those campuses down the path to unacceptable status: administrative turnover at the principal level (three principals in three years), poor school leadership, poor instructional leadership, culture of low expectations, and failure to recognize changes in school culture as a result of shifting demographic populations. Specifically, state and federal accountability did influence Paul and his administrative team on those campuses that did not meet performance standards. Paul states,

They [state and federal accountability] had a great influence in [omitted school identifier] for example they are the school that are in their 5th year of not meeting AYP. So, yes we made some administrative changes at [omitted school identifier], got a new principal in there and in the following year and entirely new

assistant principal team. We planted some more instructional staff there and that was all related to....I mean to the results of their state exams and AYP status. So, that had a tremendous influence there. In the case of [omitted school identifier], the state accountability results were an indication of a bigger problem and there were also other problems at that school, financial problems that were the result of poor leadership, so in that case it was not exclusively accountability results; there were other issues that lead us to make changes there.

It appeared Paul was suggesting his intervention actions and those of his administrative team were being influenced by state and federal accountability mandates in low-performing schools and schools that failed to meet AYP. Yet, when I specifically asked Paul in those schools specifically, if that was the case, he replied, “well it’s not all about the TAKS test.”

Referencing other processes such as academic review, in-house comprehensive school Tier reviews, and other sources of data generated by administrative and peer review teams, an in-depth analysis of “what’s going on” on that particular campus is generated and utilized. For those campuses not meeting state and federal standards of accountability, the district compiled in-depth campus analysis, which guides Paul and his teams’ decisions and intervention actions.

Achievement Inequities

As Paul and I continued our discussion on the influence and impact on his district leadership and decision-making practices on student achievement, I steered our conversations toward his influence on achievement inequities and the role he plays in reducing and eliminating student achievement differences between his student population groups. Having researched annual RISD accountability data from 2003-2008, I was aware that in many areas of reported accountability, student groups of color had

increased their scores dramatically. Yet, in comparison to their White peers, an overall 20% achievement gap persisted on all TAKS tests taken and virtually the same achievement gap percentage persisted for economically disadvantaged students as well, which represented a range between 57-65% of the total student population, depending on the school year.

What is even more interesting, after discussing and Paul acknowledging the trend (“Oh that’s a huge gap!”), he referenced several contributory factors limiting student success within his student groups. As RISD is primarily a district consisting of Hispanic students (63%), other students of color are primarily dispersed throughout the district in elementary schools, and therefore, due to the small numbers of students, those students do not count toward accountability ratings. “It’s a flaw in the system.” Acknowledging that fact, so what if I have one or two Asian/Pacific Islanders in a teacher’s class or a small group of African American students on my campus who are not getting it? They don’t count! However, as Paul states those students move up to middle school and high school where school populations become larger and students aggregate to a large number to count for accountability purposes.

Expectations

So, in addition to “student dilution” for other students of color, Paul implied some of his teachers believe White students “are going to get it,” so as a teacher, I don’t really have to work as hard at the elementary level for them to get it. This philosophical belief results in the classroom teacher only having different, lower expectations for some students and higher expectations for others, while also maintaining a weak work ethic.

Paul's perception is that his greatest challenge in achieving equitable student achievement is not only low expectations in his district but in the community as well. He states,

Everyone really has low expectations. This is a town where people drop their dirty diapers in the parking lot. This is a dirty town, we were dirty yesterday, we are dirty today. This town is going to be dirty tomorrow. So, the expectations in the whole community are low. Kind of we shouldn't get above our 'raisin' kind of thing. That filters into our schools. So one of the biggest obstacles has been going to schools, particularly westside [primarily African American and Hispanic student populations] schools and seeing this culture of low expectations playing out.

As we continued to discuss low expectations and what I interpreted as deficit thinking on Paul's part regarding the view of his schools and community, he shared his observations and thoughts on why he was having so much difficulty in "moving the needle of instructional practice" on several of his low-performing campuses.

I think it is really the result of this is all they have ever known. Sometimes the teachers are teachers that grew up in that part of town and they have the same low expectations of their kids as the teachers had of them...when I go to [school identifier omitted] or [school identifier omitted] or [school identifier omitted] which are in the more affluent parts of town and you see the level of engagement, inquiry, and the environment of the classrooms and the challenge that's afforded to those kids and then you go to another school in another part of town and you see what amounts to domestication. To me, it's just a matter of expectations, low expectations. That's been really hard. These kids, we just need to put them in shop class. Just get them in auto mechanics, get them out, get them a job...that's all they're ever going to be able to do [is the belief of the school and community].

Domestication (theme number 10)! That seemed like a harsh descriptor of what was happening in some of RISD schools. Yet, I could see on Paul's face, his choice of words was an honest expression of what he really believed was happening in some of his schools. Paul further remarked,

That [domestication] is more something that I see. I think if people think their kids' TAKS scores are high enough or if the school is academically acceptable, that's enough. Some people would believe that at this school, it's enough for these kids to be acceptable because some of these kids...whatever...the parents, the family, the background that's just the best that we can hope for here at [school identifier omitted]. That is as high as their expectations will rise. The parents believe it, the teachers kinda believe it, and I have seen it time and time again.

District Departing Thoughts

As I left Paul's second floor office that afternoon and while trying to jot down a few final observations in my journal before beginning the trip home, I could not help but think that I believed some good things were going on in RISD for some students, while others where Paul referenced, were being subject to a repetitive cycle of low expectations, deficit thinking, and domestication. I could not help but wonder why this cycle was occurring? If Paul was aware this was occurring on many of his campuses, why was he not doing anything about it? At the time, I was not sure. I hoped I had the answers in my audio recordings.

As I began the long drive home, those two questions kept popping up in my mind when I would reflect on the interview. Those were important questions to me, not just as a researcher but also as an educator and fellow human being who values personal independence and individuality.

Returning home late that night, I waited to the next day to begin transcription. I needed to find out if Paul, somewhere in our conversations provided the answers. I diligently transcribed pretty non-stop for the next two days while continually reflecting on those two questions. Did I have the answers? Was I going to need an additional

follow-up interview? Those thoughts were continually going through my mind as I continued the transcription process.

As I continued listening to the audio recording and transcribing, Paul in an earlier response to a query regarding the diversity of his teaching staff (approximately 50% Hispanic/50% Anglo) gave me the potential answer to why the deficit cycle and domestication process was continuing. Paul believed a stable teacher population at many of his campuses for students of color seemed to be a significant driving force for cultural low expectations and the domestication process. “Many of our teachers are teaching in the same schools where they went to school and so if those expectations are low when they went to school for them, they sorta repeat that cycle for their own students.”

As I replayed that section of the audio several times, it hit me. I typically think of “homegrown” teachers as being a good thing. They know the kids, the parents, and the community. Paul is telling me just the opposite. They are hurting kids! Paul’s statement appeared to explain why a culture of low expectations and deficit views had perpetuated over a long period of time in the community and in his schools but then again why was he not doing anything about it? A little bit further down the audio, he further stated,

We are a continuing contract district, one of only 10% in the entire state and so it’s not impossible but more difficult to move a poor-performing teacher out of the system than it might be if we were a regular term contract district.

Perhaps, as Paul revealed being a continuing contract district was one answer, but that answer did not necessarily reflect specifically the lack of action by a superintendent who acknowledges a practice within his district that is hurting students. I still was not satisfied with that response and continued to reflect on that question. While

performing background research prior to conducting the interviews, I ran across an editorial interview in which Paul referenced and identified the “will” to change. Paul referenced the “will” of the individual as well as the “will” of the organization. During the second interview, I asked Paul to reflect and expand on his statements. He explained,

Typically, I am not just talking about individual will of people within this organization to step outside of their comfort zone, but I am also talking about political will and specifically the political will of the school board. If they are not willing to from a policy standpoint position to change some of the things that we have here in the district that sorta hold us in our patterns of low expectations.... The board has to have the political will to bite some of that off....So when I talk about will, it’s just not the will of the people it’s also about the board having the cojones to do it.

It occurred to me the reason why Paul was not doing more to change the deficit and domestication practices in his district could be reflected by the unwillingness and support of just not his district staff but also the school board to tackle some of the tough issues and practices he described occurring in his district.

The will or lack thereof within the organization, its teachers, principals, superintendent, and school board collectively appears to promote a deficit discourse and domestication process. As I completed the transcription process, in my mind I had gotten the answers for which I was looking. I felt reassured that upon further analysis, additional answers would come to light.

Thematic Summary

The following themes were revealed during the two interviews with Paul:

8. The assembly of successful central office team is crucial to superintendent effectiveness,

9. Principals are the critical link between effectiveness, student achievement, and instructional leadership, and
10. The cultural domestication process imposes deficit thinking and marginalizes students of color.

As similarly noted in the previous two chapters, themes from this case study will be discussed in more detail in Chapter VII with additional thematic associations and connections presented.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (Freire, 1970)

In the previous three chapters, I presented what I interpreted to be significant findings that communicated and supported my identification of prevalent themes resulting from my interactions with school superintendents and onsite observations within the school districts they serve. I felt it was important for the reader to gain a greater understanding of the themes from both the participant and observational context in which they were generated. It was my goal as a researcher to allow the participants to reflect upon open-ended questions and then using a recursive dialogue, continue to explore their beliefs and perceptions in follow-up questions regarding their effectiveness as instructional leaders.

It is my intent to divide this chapter into three sections. In the first section, I will briefly summarize this research study. The second section will review all of the identified themes, highlight their interrelatedness, and underscore study conclusions resulting from 14 months of research preparation, methodology development, collecting, and analysis and reporting of data associated with conducting this study. The third section will address limitations, implications and recommendations of this study.

Summary of Study

This research study focuses on school district superintendent's self-efficacy and its perceived influence on instructional leadership in districts with persistent student

achievement inequities for economically disadvantaged and students of color. My interest in this area was stimulated by my initial desire to become a school superintendent and by my observations working as a teacher and administrator in districts with large populations of children of color. I was observing year-after-year persistent academic failure and poor student achievement resulting from, in my opinion, deficiencies in instructional leadership from the district superintendent.

I was aware of the research that indicated most district superintendents perceived themselves to be effective leaders and yet with large populations of children of color and economically disadvantaged students performing so poorly on state standardized tests, I could not see how superintendents could consider themselves to be effective instructional leaders. Recognizing that instructional leadership is but one area of superintendent leadership that can be examined, it nevertheless serves as a major thrust in raising student test scores and academic achievement under state and federal accountability mandates.

Glass (2007) reported an estimated 84% of superintendents were evaluated on effective instructional leadership criteria as part of their annual appraisals by their local school boards. These facts, thoughts, and observations provided the inspiration and stimulation for me to further seek to understand how within the context of federal and state accountability mandates, superintendent's perceptions of instructional leadership beliefs might, therefore, be influenced.

Brief Summarization of Research Literature

A review of the literature reveals research regarding the understanding of superintendent self-efficacy in today's "high-stakes" era of educational accountability is sparse. Considerable more literature can be found regarding teacher and principal efficacy, yet superintendent efficacy remains one area within the context of educational administration that has largely been unexplored.

In order to provide a clear understanding of "uncharted" exploration of superintendent self-efficacy, it is important to note the evolutionary history of the superintendency in the establishment of a contextual schema that facilitates incorporation of identified and relevant study themes. The American public school system originated from local "communities" of education that resulted from consolidation of commercial and industrial bases of commerce within growing cities and towns across the United States. During the late 1800's, with increased growth associated with increased immigration, larger cities began hiring educators as "heads" of school systems. Rural areas employed county superintendents to manage multiple school systems during this time period.

Two pivotal events, the Michigan Supreme Court ruling in 1874 (local property taxation could be used to fund secondary education) and the invention of motor vehicles were instrumental in rural consolidation of students and the formation of a single individual, the school superintendent, to manage district affairs. It was not until the late 19th century that many rural school systems consolidated and hired their first school superintendents (Reller, as cited in Candoli, 1995).

With ill-defined duties and responsibilities associated with an absence of any formal job descriptions, many superintendents became known as schoolmasters, overseeing the day-to-day supervision of teachers and students (Candoli, 1995; Tyack, 1976). It was during this time period, superintendents served as moral agents of egalitarian ideals and were expected to adhere to democratic principles and work ethics.

Superintendents had discarded their role as student and teacher supervisors in favor of administrative managers. The position of the superintendent continued through the early to mid-20th century, evolving from primarily an administrative role to one as scientific manager or chief executive officer as a result of transitions from an agrarian society to one of an industrial base as a result of the industrial revolution. Toward the last half of the 20th century, major turmoil and large-scale, public social tensions associated with racial equality and equal opportunity across the United States produced numerous reforms within the American public education system. These reforms have reshaped and redefined the position of school superintendent to one that embraces varying models of participatory leadership, to include instructional leadership from the superintendent, the district educational leader (Candoli, 1995).

Increased calls and demands for student achievement and accountability have yielded strong evidence in support of district instructional leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). These calls have resulted in an increased focus and attention on instructional leadership by the superintendent in support of educational performance outcomes for all students and specifically for children of color and low socio-economic status as mandated by federal and state accountability standards. Superintendent

inclusion of instructional leadership duties is, therefore, more important today than ever before (Gulek, 2003).

The relationship between instructional leadership and school improvement is crucial to facilitating an understanding of superintendent self-efficacy and its subsequent influence as a factor of superintendent success and effectiveness. Without understanding a sense of efficacy, “school administrators will tend to neither pursue challenging goals nor surpass obstacles that get in the way of such goals (McCollum & Kajs, 2007). As Skrla and Scheurich (2001) report, superintendents’ examination of their own inherent leadership practices in restructuring and redesigning district efforts has the potential to positively increase student achievement in districts with low and varying levels of student achievement. It is the quest for further understanding of superintendent perceptual influences in instructional leadership and school improvement practices within the context of state and federal accountability that guides this study. For that reason, within the construct of perceived self-efficacy, the purpose of this research study was to investigate public school superintendent instructional leadership beliefs in districts with persistent student achievement inequities for economically disadvantaged and students of color.

Methodology

Utilizing a critical interpretivist framework to address the problem under study, two research questions were developed:

1. How do superintendents in school districts in which children of color and children from low-income homes persistently under-perform perceive their effectiveness in the area of instructional leadership?
2. What are superintendents' perceptions about how their instructional leadership beliefs are influenced by the context of federal and state accountability in which they work?

Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, this study employed a combination of data-gathering strategies to include two individual, semi-structured interviews per case study, researcher observations, and field notes. Participants for the study were chosen on the basis of interviewed superintendents nominating and recommending other superintendent they believed were performing well as effective instructional and educational district leaders. Further consideration for study inclusion was also based on prioritizing the nominated list of superintendents having one or more campuses rated unacceptable, low-performing on the 2007-2008 AEIS and/or multiple years of unacceptable ratings with one or more campuses as determined by 2003-2008 multi-year AEIS reports.

A set of open-ended questions addressing the problem under study was developed for use in the initial participant's semi-structured interviews. Data collected from the initial audio-taped interviews were transcribed and using a constant comparative process of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), that involved categorizing and coding of identified topics and themes prompted a second list of questions to serve as an interview guide for the second interview.

Prior to the start of the second interview, member checks were performed with each superintendent participant. After completion of the second follow-up interview, copies of the second transcribed interview were either hand delivered or mailed to each study participant and were followed up with phone call conversations noting any changes, clarifications, or additions to the transcribed text.

Two individuals who both serve in district-level administrative capacities and who were knowledgeable of both the superintendency in Texas and the Texas accountability system also performed peer examinations. Their assistance was solicited to confirm findings and results as well as assist in the analysis and discussion of conclusions and recommendations.

Data Interpretation and Thematic Interrelatedness

A multiple or comparative case study approach using a critical interpretivist framework was employed that utilized two stages of data analysis: (a) within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Merriam, 1998). Using a within-case analysis, each study participant was treated as a all-inclusive, singular case study in which data were sought out and gathered to explore and compare with other segments of collected observational data, thereby providing a contextual reference in the establishment of constructing a relationship between the variables.

After completion of the within-case analysis, cross-case analysis was used to connect supporting relationships across all three case studies in order to gain an appreciable, descriptive conceptualization of unified, integrated constructed theory. These relationships of themes or “interrelatedness” of themes as conceptualized through

a critical lens, served to underscore a deeper meaning for the constructed theory that emerged, more so than what could be otherwise constructed from analyzing each individual case study.

Research Contribution

This study made a significant research contribution to understanding through a critical interpretivist framework the influences and contributions of superintendent self-efficacy beliefs and practices in districts from which children of color and children from low-income homes historically underachieve. It, furthermore, provides further insights into superintendent instructional leadership viewpoints that may not be contributing to equitable achievement constructs for elimination of racial and low-socioeconomic inequities within the context of promoting high-achieving/performing schools for all students.

Research Significance

Given the rapidly changing demographic profile in Texas and across the nation, students of color will continue to play a central role in defining educational effectiveness and achievement success for educational leaders. This research developed through a critical lens illuminates the perceptions, beliefs, and “voices” of three White male school superintendents, prompting expansion of the reader’s thinking and knowledge regarding effective superintendent instructional leadership capacities, while simultaneously exposing the “counternarrative” of power, privilege, and racism for children of color and children from low-income homes.

Emerging Themes

Ten themes emerged from the interview sessions with participating superintendents. These themes are:

1. An “effective” superintendent diverts responsibility for lack of student achievement, accountability, and maintains a “business as usual approach” to a dominant view of normality,
2. Race perception and racism overtly and covertly persists within the school and community,
3. The acceptance and dominance of White culture highlights a link between power and race,
4. Deficit thinking marginalizes opportunities and success for children of color and children from low-income families,
5. Race neutrality and equal access mask power and privilege,
6. The lack of value for educational achievement and success is precipitated by marginalization and subordination of students of color,
7. Superintendent views serve as obstacles to achievement and success,
8. The assembly of successful central office team is crucial to superintendent effectiveness
9. Principals are the critical link between effectiveness, student achievement and instructional leadership, and
10. The cultural domestication process imposes deficit thinking and marginalizes students of color.

Themes 1-4

The theme of a self-acclaiming, effective superintendent maintaining positional power and authority by diverting responsibility is consistent with normative interpretations of critical pedagogy by attempting to explain poor student performance in a wider context as simply the fault of others, in this case, classroom teachers. Consistent with reported research that indicates the majority of superintendents believe they are effective, Kevin Lee has yet to realize the first step of connecting and applying any degree of effectiveness, is the “praxis” realization of the embedded implications of not accepting responsibility or accountability for student achievement.

Classroom teachers are to blame and are at fault if achievement data reflect the lack of student success and achievement. Even with the self-acknowledgement of providing curriculum and instructional support and guidance, Kevin Lee places fault and blame in student achievement strictly upon the teachers. By interpreting and attributing lack of student success to the actions of others, Kevin Lee is able to maintain a level of consciousness that sustains, rationalizes, and validates described school and social practices, masks potential influences, and perpetuates existing inequities and inequalities.

The second theme, race perception and racism within the school and community, is embodied in many of the described actions, behaviors, and practices identified within not only the structures of schooling but also supported by the social and collective construction of the community. Generational racism is currently alive, actively flourishing and persisting in both the community and schools. As identified, the

perceptions, actions, and beliefs reported by the school superintendent (inclusive of himself, staff, parents, and community members) are demonstrative of overt and covert acts of racism that reinforce existing dominate power relations and serve to preserve existing social inequality and inequities within the school and local community.

The perception of race described within the context of White and Black expressed sentiments, attitudes, and discourses also provide continued maintenance of existing power relations. As described by Grogan (1999), these types of structures found in schools where race and skin color delineate marginalized differences perpetuate existing power relations. “Me and my kind will lose out if you and your kind benefit” (p. 532) is a typical example of thought that exemplifies, preserves, and institutionalizes oppression, exclusion, and marginalization for children of color and children from low-income homes.

Tightly interwoven within the perception of race, is the acceptance and dominance of White culture as a significant third theme. This theme is represented by the superintendents’ perception that the majority of district stakeholders, White or Black, would view any person of color in any administrative role, either within the district or campuses, as a negative. Further acknowledgement by the superintendent that a leadership role for a person of color might be a contributing factor for racist sentiments and might contribute to a general lack of student achievement also highlights the connective link between power and race.

Interestingly, large portions of school district stakeholders as well as school board members are African Americans, yet they hold minority positions of power in

school and community authority. Dominance by White individuals within the school system is perpetuated by the traditional position of authority, indicative of a majority versus minority rule of governance. As part of the principles and tenets of American democracy, power is held and maintained by the majority.

In the case of these findings, local power is held and maintained by the White school superintendent and by the local school board of whom the majority is also White. Central to this theme of White dominance is the lack of opportunity and expectational success for students of color and students of low socio-economic status, as identified by the superintendents' belief in his own individual capacity and perceptions of his ability to communicate and establish levels of communication and trust with his students and their likelihood of success after completion of their secondary education.

It is the relationship between White dominance, power, and race in terms of the superintendent's perceptions regarding his capacity for educational and instructional leadership that has ultimately influenced (some would argue negatively) and filtered down to his staff, students, and community members.

The fourth major theme that was identified, deficit thinking, marginalizes opportunities and success for children of color and children from low-income families, emerged from many conversations during the interviewing process. I must admit as a fellow researcher and doctoral candidate, in reflection I was taken aback to the degree and frequency by which Kevin Lee communicated blame for lack of student achievement, academic failure, and success on cultural and racial deficiencies as representative of racial issues. Clearly, the expressed deficits highlighted in the

preceding text and throughout the course of Kevin Lee's interviews, point to the problem as failures, particularly with/in the parents, children, and community and not in the school system.

By attributing academic failure and lack of success to students' own internal deficiencies resulting from individual, family, and community deficits, Kevin Lee is suggesting an external, cultural model of student failure and deficit that is self-perpetuating and sustaining. This is further suggestive of a general inability by district leadership, in this case Kevin Lee, to affect any degree of positive change in student achievement and/or achievement equity because the problem lies not (internally) within the school system but (externally) with the students, families, and community. Until the tendency to place lack of performance and achievement success on someone else is altered by Kevin Lee, "there is insufficient exploration of the institutional and individual practices, assumptions and processes" (Berman, Chambliss, & Geiser, 1999, p. 151) to contribute to or weaken established patterns and linkages between existing school practices and student outcomes. It is not surprising, therefore, due to the lack of intrinsic examination into deficit thinking by Kevin Lee, that a lack of achievement and underperformance for children of color is continuing to perpetuate.

Themes 5-7

Several themes emerged from my interview sessions with the second superintendent, Ed. The fifth study theme focused again on the major topic of race and racism but incorporated ancillary correlates to masking of power and privilege by the dominant White culture. During our discussions, Ed was quick to point out that

differences in student achievement between White students and students of color were really not so much an ethnic or race issue but rather an issue of socio-economic status. He also maintained the perception that new Latino students who have recently immigrated to his district from Mexico, maintain a harder work ethic and higher value for education and are more successful than other Hispanic and White peers. These two beliefs operate under the critical pedagogies of illusion and equal opportunity.

Specifically, negating ethnicity by the camouflage of race neutrality and equal access, Ed's use of color blindness serves to mask self-interests of power and privilege by the dominant group. Furthermore, Ed's acknowledgement of greater numbers of programs targeting Hispanic students can further exemplify his attempts to address social injustices stemming from his perceived assumptions of language, cultural, and social constructs whereby the formation of an identity by a student can be subjected to the ideals and normative structures of the dominant, White culture. My statement, "Ed's all about programs," stems from my recognition that the quantity of programs does not necessarily equate to any degree of effectiveness, nor is it representative of any factor, other than positional authority for implementation of programs that can further support racially biased and exclusionary practices of the White class.

A sixth theme, lack of value for educational achievement and accomplishment, is revealed by Ed's perception of the vision of success for his students. Preparing kids for a vocation, making students successful citizens and students having the ability to support a family were communicated as important tenets of his expectations for his students, more so than academic, college preparation. Even within the context of federal and state

accountability, Ed communicated little anxiety and minimal apprehension regarding testing, or for testing scores in terms of student performance.

In addition to the lack of importance for post-secondary educational endeavors, the perception that parents of students of color communicate a lesser value for education to their children was also communicated. All of these perceptions and beliefs reflect a critical recognition of marginalized acts of subordination that have resulted in historical low expectations for academic success, tracking of students in low-level classes, and a masking of substandard schooling practices for people of color and low-income status.

A seventh theme materialized from Ed's contrasting views regarding specific attributes that he believed he possessed that have enabled him to improve and affect student performance for children of color and children from low-income homes in his district. Interestingly, Ed communicated his ability to assess individual situations and accept varying opinions and suggestions as attributes that serve to reinforce a general philosophy of achievement and academic success. As Ed explains "you're inclusive of everybody...the philosophy just blends into everything." This statement implies an emphasis on student achievement that is strongly interactive, interwoven with the daily practices, procedures, and plans that support the belief in high expectations for all students.

Yet, this type of participatory emphasis is not demonstrated for some students (those primarily of color and low-income status) when they are encouraged to drop out of school and seek other means of gaining high school equivalency as Ed suggests they do. More so, Ed's deficit view regarding achievement gap deficiencies for children of

color and low-income homes suggests responsibility displacement be placed upon the lack of parental support or intact families within the home and not within the school system, its personnel, programs, or policies.

From a critical perspective, it would appear that Ed's perceptions regarding his abilities and expectational views for students of color have become barriers to achievement that are potentially displacing equity ideals and, subsequently, are limiting academic success levels for children of color and children from low-income homes.

Themes 8-10

The capacity to build a successful central office team, the eighth theme is suggestive of an organizational structure that is predicated on successful individuals reflecting on experiential knowledge and campus success, thereby empowering campus leaders to act accordingly. It is Paul's belief that these individuals serve as role models and are the "go to" people when principals have questions or concerns. What happens when the principal or more importantly to the students of the school when no questions are asked? I think Paul informed us of his observations and beliefs very succinctly.

If teachers and principals are allowing low expectations and deficit views to infiltrate their schools and are maintaining a status quo approach in instructional practices while doing nothing to change them, why would you expect to see a change? Paul believes he has the "best central office team in the state," but if they are not organizational leaders who engage individuals in examining and promoting actions that uncover the limiting relationships of power, equality, and social reproduction wherever found in the district, then they themselves are just as accountable as the principals and

classroom teachers that maintain a status quo approach to low-student achievement and achievement inequities for their students. It would appear the “will” of the individual as Paul referenced, or the lack thereof, is collectively guiding the “will” of the organization, in this case resulting in a normalization of existing “limiting” practices and pedagogy.

The ninth theme resulted from the analysis of Paul’s continued referral to campus principals serving as the critical link to effectiveness, student achievement, and instructional leadership. Ironically, while acknowledging and maintaining a view of himself as an effective instructional leader, Paul’s reference to principals serving as the “lynch pins” for everything that is accomplished, thereby reinforces a dominant view of campus leadership in which leaders are “really dynamic, instructionally focused, and knowledgeable principals.” But are they really? It would appear principals and teachers who are maintaining low expectations and deficit views of their students lack the social capital to develop positive and supportive relationships among themselves as educators and with their students’ parents and other adults within the community.

The development of social capital is predicated on a belief that we act a certain way or believe certain things as a result of both individual and collective social interactions. Paul acknowledges, “it is my personal responsibility to model the kind of leadership behavior that I want to see happening in our schools,” and is suggestive of his participation and engagement with staff members at the campus level. However, Paul admits he does not involve himself in getting to know his teaching staff and relies on building relationships with only his campus principals. I maintain, whatever the kind of leadership Paul is modeling to his principals is not the type of social capital investment

that is predicated on establishing and developing healthy relationships and interactions with all campus stakeholders that subsequently lead to advantageous outcomes such as increase academic performance. Principals are not “invested” in further developing the necessary interconnections and associations with their school community, necessary to produce the “academic capital” that will increase student achievement and lower student achievement inequities.

The findings also are suggestive that community influence has played a significant part in the defining of cultural expectations and student aspirations for many of Paul’s students, thereby effecting student achievement for many of students of color. As Paul referenced, the community and campus staff have contributed to low expectations, deficit views, and participation in an educational process of domestication for his students in low-performing schools: theme number 10.

Significantly infiltrating and negatively influencing his campus staff, students and parents, these collective views of marginalization and normalization have contributed to an adaptive adequacy regarding student achievement. Domestication in this context is predicated on the construct that students are conforming to the norms, values, and beliefs of the dominant view of what the school and community expect.

Paul is quite clear in his descriptions and expectations of what are “those” expectations. Yet, his recognition has failed to produce a critical praxis in his actions and behaviors. In this case study, campus institutional power and community influence are both having a negative influence on student achievement and achievement equity and,

thus, highlight the disconnect between central office administration and the symbiotic relationship between campuses and community.

Specifically, in Paul's case, findings support an even greater disconnect between the ability of a school superintendent to not only recognize social injustices, inequalities, and deficit practices but more importantly to take action to empower, and emancipate other individuals in the organization to change district and campus policies and practices that are negatively impacting student achievement and promoting educational inequities. Just as strong, positive communities are developed from highly involved and engaged citizens, schools also have the potential and capacity to engage, empower and emancipate individuals within their school organization. It appears Paul's failure to take a close introspective examination of his own emancipatory knowledge and subsequent failure on his part to act, has resulted in maintenance of a status quo approach to low expectations and deficit views by stakeholders within his district and community.

Interrelatedness of Themes

Each of the ten themes that emerged from this research study can be categorized further into four interrelated and unified primary topics of conclusionary development:

1. Superintendents' "distancing" maintains normality and limits instructional leadership effectiveness,
2. White culture dominates race and racism perceptions,
3. Views, beliefs, and perceptions of superintendents serve as obstacles to achievement and equity, and

4. Normalizing and marginalizing practices by superintendents perpetuate achievement inequities.

To summarize the perceptions of all three-study superintendents, they all are effective instructional leaders. It was not, however, until further clarifying questioning occurred in all superintendent interviews that reflections upon collective instructional leadership behaviors and views regarding personal accountability and the influence of the accountability system illuminated the first theme, superintendents' distancing maintains normality and limits instructional leadership effectiveness.

When superintendents were questioned regarding their belief in themselves as effective instructional leaders, all three-study superintendents responded with positive affirmations and gave various examples of their effective instructional leadership. Yet, upon further clarifying questioning, when I tied instructional leadership to instructional effectiveness in terms of addressing achievement inequities demonstrated on state and federal accountability assessments for children of color, superintendents defaulted to other administrators or teachers within their districts as their having primary responsibility.

All study superintendents distanced themselves from linking their actions, beliefs, and practices to the lack of academic success for all students and contributing to persistent achievement inequities for students of color. It is this discourse of distancing oneself from involvement in instructional leadership that Cuban (1984) concludes prevents school improvement reforms from attaining high levels of achievement. Through this distancing of themselves, study superintendents were able to maintain a

dominant view of normality, thereby preventing the “reinvention” of student success and achievement for all students. As concluded by Peterson and Finn (1988), seldom do you find a “high achieving school system with a low performance superintendent” (p. 42). As Cuban (1984) concluded, superintendents play a significant role in instructional leadership, the defining of improvement reforms and ultimately the levels of student success and achievement attained. As reported by Bredeson (1996), additional research findings in the literature are also supportive for increasing superintendent personal involvement in instructional leadership and in so doing perpetuate all students to new levels of achievement. In this study, instructional leadership was maintained as an area of effectiveness although minimized by superintendents distancing themselves from both personal involvement and accountability system influence.

The second interrelated theme, White culture dominates race and racism perceptions, emerged within all three superintendent case studies by the covert identification of specific examples of racism and overt assumptions regarding perceptions, beliefs, and practices. From examples of hatred of Black people and the building of trust, to beliefs regarding work ethics and the defining of cultural aspirations, all serve to highlight racist perceptions, assumptions, and beliefs by study superintendents.

Maintaining constructed roles, perceptions, and identities as White male superintendents and while working within organizational structures that predominately are comprised by majority White individuals representing power and authority figures, I pose the question, “Why would a White superintendent wish to deviate from the

conforming normality of a White majority that reinforces power and White identification whether with his teaching staff or with his school board?” One possible answer that findings from this study support is that they do not deviate.

Indeed, a general willingness to maintain their position of authority, through the masking of actions and practices of the dominant White majority is exemplified by all three-study superintendents. Citing specific examples from each superintendent such as, “glaring differences in comfortability factors,” to segregation of certain populations in certain teaching groups or classes, to having the ability to bring in the “right” individual into the organization all serve to mask power and maintain adherence to the dominance of White culture. It is this linkage to dominate White culture by superintendents who serve to highlight school practices of White privilege that provides and confers opportunities and benefits that are advantageous to White students simply because they are White.

As Andersen (1999) asserts, “racism is not just a matter of individual beliefs but stems fundamentally from the differential systems of privilege and disadvantage that historically accumulate in different group experiences” (p. 9). For children of color, adherence and subjugation to an imposed dominant White culture by study superintendents may have produced an environment of educational disadvantage that may have resulted in persistent lower achievement success and perpetuated achievement inequities. Thus, by students of color conforming to the dominant power White culture, they may be reinforcing and reproducing normalizing patterns of racist compliance that

lead to maintenance of a status quo result, or in the case of student achievement, persistent levels of year-after-year low performance (Leistyna, 1999).

The third interrelated theme, obstacles to achievement and equity, emerged from superintendent-communicated perceptions of expectations and success. Study superintendents were quick to point out that success on accountability assessments was not their primary goal. All superintendents in the study reiterated comments that were demonstrative of marginalizing practices of subordination.

Declaration of the failure to see color by Ed, failure to acknowledge racial differences by Kevin Lee, and “student dilution” by Paul all serve as examples of negating cultural views and marginalizing student groups that can be perceived as barriers to achievement and equity success. These pathologizing views serve to silence and subordinate students of color, thereby negating differences in individuals and cultures (Shields, 2004). Subsequently, as obstacles and barriers to student achievement and equity, these internalized views of study superintendents generate a general disregard in their organizations for the need to examine advantaged and disadvantaged practices that ultimately perpetuates dominance of the status quo power and privilege of the White majority.

One comment specifically made by Kevin Lee in my opinion served to characterize the discourse of obstacles to high expectations and student success by all study superintendents. Restating Kevin Lee’s belief,

It is very basic, but I like to think about that one-gallon milk jug. No matter how hard you try, you’re not going to be able to put one point x gallons of liquid in that jug. No matter how hard you try, it is not going to happen. Every time you fill that jug up, it is only going to hold a gallon. Sometimes I feel that individual

capacity is like that. The more that I look at it, especially if you are talking about certain special populations...that is just the way it is.

I reference Kevin Lee's response as a type of "capacity chugging" in terms of his belief in some students having the individualistic capability to "gulp" and meet accountability performance standards, while others are left "gasping" and choking for air with the realization by them and others they lack the ability to "chug." My use of the metaphorical term "chugging" personifies my interpretations of study superintendents' deficit perceptions of individualistic student expectations as obstacles to student achievement and success for some students, primarily those of color. The other two superintendents, Ed and Paul, in this study also communicated similar examples of "capacity chugging" in terms of obstacles to success for some students by providing examples of exclusionary viewpoints regarding achievement and equity and low expectations of stakeholders.

The fourth interrelated theme, deficit thinking, (Valencia, 1997) emerged numerous times throughout all superintendent interviews and intersected many times throughout the discourse with marginalizing views of cultural domestication. All superintendents acknowledged many examples of cultural deficiencies, or manifestations of deficit thinking in their views, beliefs, and practices for educational failure of students of color and low-income homes, instead of the schools or the educational system. Crucial to making a difference in defeating "the culture of poverty" (Burney & Beilke, 2008; Lewis, 1998) is the removal of cultural deficiencies and to look at children as individuals and not members of specific ethnic groups.

At times throughout each superintendent interview, there were moments in which I as a researcher wanted to say, “Okay, timeout! You’re placing blame, making stereotypical responses, and communicating social constructed perspectives that are serving to marginalize various populations of your students.” These thoughts came to mind in every single interview; but as a researcher, I intrinsically acknowledged the inappropriateness of addressing those comments with study participants in the maintenance of researcher/participant interview protocol and remained silent.

As previously referenced, heavily interwoven within the framework of deficit thinking, student domestication for students of color was a term that one superintendent (Paul) used to describe cultural and organizational practices in his district that included low expectations, acceptance for minimal success, and the normalizing of subordinate beliefs and practices. Other study superintendents responded with various examples that suggested the process of domestication for students of color was also occurring in their districts. They just did not identify the process by name. Serving as evidence, Kevin Lee’s comments placing significance for personnel tenure and the building of trust with some of his students and Ed’s views regarding preparing students to support themselves and having the necessary skills that allow them to cope in society exemplify.

Attempting to linking communicated experiential knowledge to research scholarship, Rodriguez (2006) asserts the politics of domestication within a cultural lens is a negative process of acculturation that requires individuals to conform uncritically to a set of determined norms established by a community of practice. It is my interpretation of findings that suggests all study superintendents not only impose their own set of

conforming marginalizing norms within their educational organizations but actually promote and support domesticating practices through the will of the organization, referencing the will of the superintendent carrying out the will of the school board. To paraphrase a quote from one superintendent, if things are going to change, the will to change must be collectively present.

Conclusions

Accountability System Influence

As Skrla and Scheurich (2001) reported, increased accountability produced increased superintendent examination, acknowledgement, and displacement of deficit-thinking perspectives resulting in a sliding scale of equity gains by students when changes in district policies and practices were subsequently modified. As superintendents in their study continually monitored, evaluated, and altered deficit-oriented displacement in school practice, they subsequently developed equity-oriented views ultimately producing positive equity movement in their districts (see Figure 1). In their study, it is my belief they saw the accountability system displacing deficit thinking by producing: (a) a major influence in producing a shift in equity ideals, (b) data supported “proof” that children of color were not being served as well as their White peers, (c) increased superintendent leadership capacity, and (d) re-evaluation of deficit and equity oriented views. They observed a shift in deficit thinking and a subsequent change in district policies and practices by their study superintendents, thereby producing a positive shift in equity consciousness and ideals.

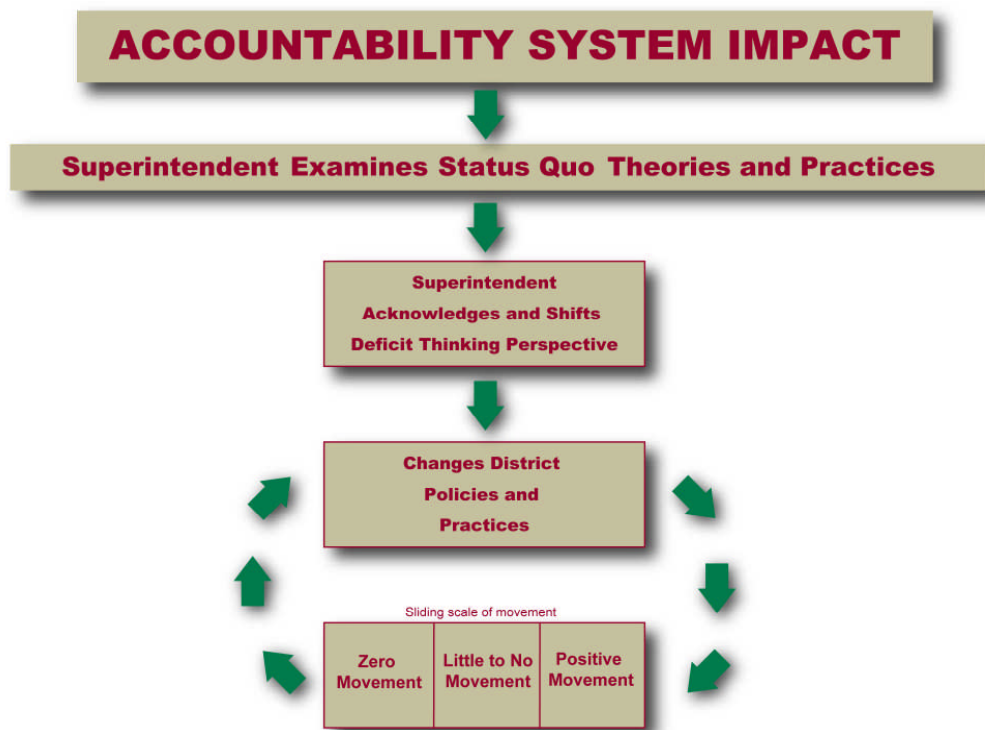


Figure 1. Skrla and Scheurich's deficit displacement model in school leadership.

While findings from this study support superintendent acknowledgement of the presence of the Texas high-stakes accountability system, varying degrees of accountability influences were communicated by participating superintendents. Interestingly, but not totally surprisingly, none of the superintendents communicated a high degree of influence, which I conclude serves as a negative, contributory factor to achieving equity-oriented, academic success for all students. In contrast to findings from Skrla and Scheurich (2001), superintendents in this study did not displace their deficit thinking perspectives nor were significantly influenced to move their campuses much

less their districts to equitable ideals as a result of Texas accountability system. As previously identified, superintendents placed the lack of achievement and success on the fault of their staff, students, families, communities, and cultures. Study superintendents appeared to vary in general acceptance and willingness to assume personal responsibility for low academic student success and failure. Participating study superintendents did not see themselves as part of the problem or contributing to the lack of student success and achievement inequities.

As I reflect on the communicated dialogues with participating superintendents, programs, policies, and practices were implemented or modified only in reflection, on specific contextual school or district perceived needs, never acknowledging their own deficit views, and deficit perspectives of their staff and community and their potential influence or lack thereof on instructional leadership and school achievement. Superintendents did not seek to respond to liberating goals that foster empowerment and emancipation of stakeholders.

As Garcia and Guerra (2004) assert, true school reform initiatives do not succeed, due to the failure of educators to examine their own beliefs and assumptions and to look internally at traditional schooling programs and inherent systemic practices for meaningful and significant change. Superintendents participating in this study did not appear to be aware of their intrinsic influence on deficit-thinking perspectives and viewpoints and the subsequent impact on instructional leadership and achievement equity.

When a level of awareness for deficit thinking and its perceived influence was raised by the researcher and questioned, it was readily dismissed as a non-existent or of an insignificant, external consequence with little to no acknowledgement or subsequent impact upon the programs, practices, and policies of the district. It appears that instructional leadership and student achievement are continuing to be defined by self-reinforcing, intrinsic deficit-thinking paradigms that are perpetuating significant achievement gap inequities between White students and low socio-economic students and students of color by study superintendents. The Texas accountability system did not influence superintendents in this study to displace, re-evaluate, or illuminate deficit-thinking practices in the districts they serve sufficiently to produce any shift in attributable equity movement.

Instructional Leadership

Study superintendents all viewed themselves as effective instructional leaders even while large populations of students (primarily from low-income homes and students of color) demonstrated poor academic success. While study superintendents maintained strong beliefs in their effective leadership and instructional guidance at the district level as major contributors to student achievement, no mention or reference to attributing student achievement inequities to their school improvement reforms was ever communicated. (Equity was never mentioned in the same context unless specifically questioned by the researcher.)

While study superintendents recognized and acknowledged large populations of their students of color and low socio-economic status are not achieving at similar

achievement levels as their White peers, various variations of deficit views and normalization practices attempted to explain the observable achievement inequities. Superintendents in this study defaulted instructional leadership responsibilities to other individuals within their organizational structure, and therefore, distanced themselves from linkage with marginalizing school practices and lower student achievement outcomes.

Superintendents in all study districts similarly demonstrated their failure to examine their own emancipatory knowledge and failed to shift emancipation efforts in their districts, thereby producing no change in district instructional leadership policies and practices. Superintendents also failed not only to explore their own organizational instructional leadership practices that contribute to social and cultural mediocrity, but also failed to act and instill upon their principals, teachers, and staff members that they themselves are part of the problem. Findings from this study support the conclusion that superintendents' constructed self-efficacy influences instructional leadership and student achievement and has the potential to have a sliding scale of effect on transforming their districts into high-achieving, equitable, emancipatory organizations of learning (see Figure 2).

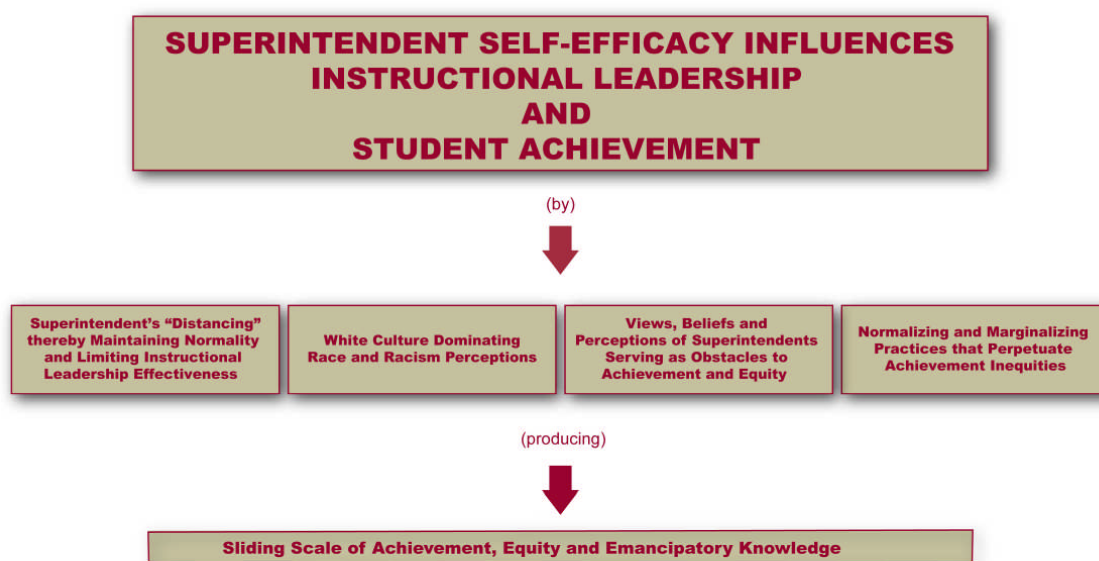


Figure 2. Superintendent self-efficacy influence on instructional leadership and student achievement model.

Limitations, Implications, and Recommendations

I would like to think I personally brought a contribution to this study, which perhaps others would find difficult if not impossible to bring to the table. While serving in various capacities as a teacher, administrator, and mentor in various districts that exhibited extreme student wealth and poverty, low and high student achievement, and arguably, varying amounts of student success, I have constructed a unique set of experiences that heightened my awareness and subsequent questioning and identification of various alternative discourses identified and explored in this study. As a critical interpretivist, I have interpreted and constructed my “glimpse” into district-level leadership that highlighted the traditional White male-dominated position of school superintendent through my lens of experiences as communicated in one-on-one

interviews at each given time and place. Thus, these constructions serve as general, yet unique, experiential study limitations.

Additionally, my ability to “fit in” as one of the “good ‘ol boys” of the superintendency afforded me the opportunity to enter into “their world” and thereby gain a level of confidence and freedom for honest and sincere expression that perhaps others may not have been able to attain. I was able to establish a level of comfort, familiarity, and reprieve during our conversations that some individuals might have perceived as sexist, racist, offensive, and discriminatory. My own White privilege and power provided my “in” to ask challenging and probing questions and facilitated what I believe to be the expression of honest and truthful responses by participants.

Providing a general level of opportunity, my White privilege and power served in a facilitative capacity for personal transferability between participant and researcher, while simultaneously reinforcing my belief that if I were not White, male, middle-aged, and a college educated “superintendent wanna-be,” I might get a different response. Replacing the researcher with a person of color or with a female, or for that matter with a young, inexperienced educator and researcher, I believe would have severely compromised and limited the data collection from this study. The combination of my personal experiences, skin color, gender, and constructed interview interactions thus formed the basis of my interpretative analysis, while simultaneously serving as transferable limitations to this study.

Superintendent Preparatory Programs

For many years, administrator preparation programs have been scrutinized and criticized for not providing adequate foundations for superintendent leadership to include skills, knowledge, and research scholarship that focused on improving diverse student achievement and decreased achievement inequities for all students. While changes, additions, and improvements have greatly enhanced preparatory programs, more attention should be directed toward mandatory inclusion of graduate-level courses and encouragement of graduate students to conduct research studies of superintendent district leadership that include: (a) deficit thinking, (b) critical theory, (c) critical race theory, (d) White domination and marginality, and (e) White power and privilege.

Courses and research inquiries that increase not only awareness but also facilitate a “praxis” of critical consciousness for working with racially diverse, marginalized cultures and communities should be put into practice. By increasing superintendent “potential,” a critical linkage connecting the beliefs, perceptions, and views of district leadership can be established toward the implementation of intervention “actions” that target the growing population of marginalized students, thereby improving their level of academic achievement and success.

Research Scholarship

It would be interesting to study superintendents exiting formal university preparation programs that emphasized the establishment of dominant critical theory and critical race theory discourses and the subsequent implementation of interventions in districts they serve. Demonstrating a link (theory- to-practice) between superintendent

“real world” practices of emancipatory leadership structures, programs, and policies that produce gains in student success, achievement, and equity for all students would make a significant contribution to the research scholarship.

These research studies should focus on district-level leadership “in action” that promotes a critical examination into promotion and reproduction of individual as well as systemic inequities that may be contributing to the lack of student achievement and achievement gaps. Specific studies promoting district level (superintendent) intrinsic examination, critique, transformation, and subsequent emancipation of marginalized groups of students could also serve to highlight the interconnectedness of critical theory to other epistemological theories, understandings, and participatory actions involving gender, social class, equity, and opportunity.

District and Campus Level Organizational Influence

This study involved examining the perceptions, values, and beliefs of three school superintendents in district educational leadership positions of various school sizes. While nominated superintendents were chosen to represent small, medium and large school districts, the acknowledgement of organizational size in relation to direct superintendent contact and influence raises potential interest for further investigation. Research focusing on superintendents with varying levels of organizational support at the district and campus levels would be of interest to the identification and impact of staff conveyance, transmission, and implementation of communicated actions, practices, and directives associated increasing educational effectiveness and equity for not only White students but for students of color as well.

Professional Organizations

First time superintendents are required by Texas Education Code statute (TEC 242.25) to participate in a one-year mentorship program that must include 36 hours of professional development, monthly meetings, and program completion within 18 months of employment. The Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA), as one of the largest (2,000+) member professional educator organizations in the state provides a one-year superintendent mentoring program.

TASA administrators in charge of the mentoring program choose and assign superintendent mentors to participating first-time superintendents from a list of experienced superintendents who have completed one day of training and five years of experience as a district superintendents. Professional development curriculum is also determined by the “needs of the superintendents” and the “requirements of the position” by TASA administrative personnel.

Clearly, as the number of districts with diverse populations continues to increase and achievement gaps continue to be maintained, increased support and assistance for academic and achievement intervention for students of color and low socio-economic status is needed for superintendents. TASA should incorporate and participate in leading professional development training that specifically targets increased recognition and awareness for superintendent cultural and social influencers that contribute to academic and achievement inequities.

As this study has shown, superintendent perceptions, beliefs, and actions serve as significant contributors for the lack of student achievement and perpetuation of

achievement inequities. Linkage between superintendent effectiveness and instructional and achievement leadership must also developed and fostered for all students. TASA should, therefore, assign mentors to first-time superintendents who have demonstrated success with students of color, increased student achievement with all students, and who have the ability to decrease present and persistent student achievement gaps.

Regional Educational Service Centers

Similar to the TASA mentoring program, novice and newly hired superintendents have the option to participate in first-time superintendent academies that have both formal and informal mentoring components built into their program structures within their regional educational service centers (ESC's). The emphasis of professional development for the first-time superintendent incorporates monthly meetings and trainings on a wide variety of leadership topics associated with personnel, budgeting, finance, and legislative actions and mandates, and are exposed to "managing the business" of the district.

Field service agents from regional ESC's can be chosen by superintendents to serve as mentors or they can choose other experienced and "trained" superintendents to serve in that capacity. As these findings suggest, ESC's instructional leadership administrators and field service agents should encourage superintendents of highly diverse districts to choose mentors who have demonstrated achievement success for all students as well as successfully decreased achievement inequities for low-income and students of color. ESC's should also incorporate professional development that focuses and challenges the dominant structural authority and power of the superintendent and

his/her impact on funding, curriculum, instruction, assessment decisions, and practices that may be influencing the lack of student achievement for low-income and students of color.

ESC's have not only a legal but moral obligation to assist in meeting the educational needs of the school districts and students they serve. ESC's should expose and assist all superintendents in identifying, analyzing, and interpreting their deficit social and stereotypical structures, policies, and programs within the districts they serve, for students of color who may be contributing to their lack of success and achievement.

Regional ESC's should also focus professional development training with practicing superintendents on developing discussions and dialogue that create counter narratives to White privilege, power, and dominance, thereby facilitating a transformative resistance to existing cultural and structural institutional and organizational practices that may have marginalized, disempowered, and silenced their students of color.

Final Thoughts

Quoting from Held's (1980) pivotal book, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas*, "It has been often said that because critical theorists frequently criticize the works of others, it is easier to say what critical theory is not rather than what it is" (p. 24). The impetus for using a critical interpretivist framework, is that the researcher is not to criticize individual superintendents, but rather to critically focus on their actions, beliefs, and perceptions that characterize their work both individually and collectively. My intent through highlighting of superintendent

interconnections and related linkages was not to focus superficially on similarities and differences but to underscore both conscious and unconscious existing primary structures of power and privilege by the dominant White social class of superintendent influence.

It is important to note that as the principal researcher, I recognize the use of critical pedagogy as only a tool and not a wooden stake that can slay the “vampires” of inequality, domination, and subordination. In recognition of these important tenets, I hope others will join me in the quest for illumination, emancipation, and hopeful participatory action in the reconciliation of reader critique and the development of a reflective and transformative “consciousness” in promotion of an educationally and socially just society.

As an individual who may one day be interested in becoming a school superintendent, I recognize as I hope others do as well, the importance for grasping the goals of this research and the understandings of the inductive processes that are contributing to the formation of a constructed meaning for its significance. In this study, my own White privilege and power afforded me the opportunity to not only question but also confront the “status quo” views, beliefs, and practices of superintendents and to explore the influential forces and “performances” that serve to limit racial and low socio-economic achievement inequities in the public educational system.

It is my hope through the use of my own Whiteness and privilege, this critical inquiry will serve to inspire and promote a praxis-orientation of reflective action in those who read it and through alteration and modification of their own “performances,”

individuals can become self-actualized and empowered. I am an optimist. I do believe most individuals in education today are still hopeful and are clinging to a hope that outcomes (individually and collectively) can be different. I make the assumption in my beliefs that superintendents care about educational outcomes for all children; but based on the findings of this study, I question, *Why should superintendents care if all students are academically successful if they can have successful careers without ever recognizing their influence in leading and directing achievement and equity reforms for children of color and children from low-income homes?* Perhaps school superintendents are just not aware of their influence and impact in these areas. Therefore, it is my paramount intent as well as a primary goal of critical pedagogy that this critical body of research contribute to the “awakening” and making of a “critical” difference in the acknowledgement of superintendent self-efficacy influence and emancipatory knowledge thereby establishing a “foundation for social justice, equality, and empowerment” (McLaren, 2003, p. 73).

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I am researching superintendent beliefs regarding their influence on equitable student achievement for all students. As an experienced superintendent, I am very much interested in hearing of your views and insights regarding experiences and thoughts that you believe would contribute to this body of research.

I would like to gain a greater understanding of your transition into the superintendency.

- Briefly describe your educational preparation for the superintendency.
- Please explain your career path to the superintendency.
- How many years of experience do you possess as a school superintendent? How many years of experience do you have with the current district?
- Please explain your motivation for accepting your current position as school superintendent.

I am going to ask you several questions regarding your general assessment of student achievement in your current district.

- Please briefly describe your assessment regarding student achievement for your current school district upon your arrival as school superintendent.
- During your current district tenure as school superintendent, how if any, has your assessment regarding student achievement changed?
- What or whom do you believe has been responsible for the change or lack thereof in student achievement? Please explain.
- Your district student achievement performance is strongly guided by your actions and behaviors as school superintendent. Do you agree or disagree? Please explain your response.
- Do you believe that as school superintendent someone else in the organization should be responsible for student achievement? If so, who?
- What factors do you believe have contributed to the success or lack thereof for student achievement in your district?
- Do you believe that other individuals within the organization seek your advice and direction regarding improving student achievement for all students? If so, how and to what degree?

I have several questions regarding your personal held beliefs and values as a school superintendent and would like you to briefly respond.

- Do you believe you are an effective superintendent? If so, how and in what areas? Instructional leadership? Direct student learning?
- Please explain your vision of success for students in your district.
- What core beliefs and values regarding your role as school superintendent do you believe are important? Any rigid or non-negotiable held beliefs by you? Please provide details.

- What are your beliefs regarding setting expectations for your students? Do you believe differences should or should not exist in expectations for representing special populations, such as special education and English as second language learners?
- Do you believe your personal held values and beliefs have had any effect on equitable student achievement? Please explain.
- What do you as school superintendent believe has been your greatest contribution, if any regarding achieving equitable student performance?
- Do you believe your values and beliefs have motivated others in your organization to seek equitable student achievement for all students? If so, how?
- One way for an individual to create a value and belief system is through a series of masterful successes that produce strong feelings of accomplishment. Please describe your feelings of accomplishment with regard to student performance in your district?
- Have your feelings of accomplishment changed? If so, how?
- Like successes, personal failures also affect one's value and belief system and also produces strong feelings that can undermine one's personal efficacy. Please describe your experiences, actions, and behaviors that you believe could be considered failures with regard to achieving equitable student performance in your district.
- How have these failures impacted your ability, if any to exercise and influence other individuals or individual perceptions within your organization?

I would like to ask you several questions regarding your opinion of the capacity as a school superintendent to produce equitable student achievement for all students.

- Is it your belief that the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities that you have brought to the district have been responsible for student achievement performance in your district? Please explain your answer.
- Please describe how as a school superintendent your personal beliefs have defined your efforts to improve and provide equitable student achievement.
- How have these efforts and/or outcomes affected your personal beliefs?
- Please describe any obstacles or challenging experiences that you believe have contributed to student achievement in your district?
- In what ways have you as the district superintendent promoted academic success for all students?
- How confident are you with regard to your held individual beliefs that equitable academic achievement for your students can be produced?

I would like to give you an open opportunity to provide any additional information, comments, and/or responses related to any of the questions I have asked.

VITA

Kenneth Ray Whitt was born in Bay City, Texas, the son of Mary Lois Griffin Whitt and Delbert Gene Whitt. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in biology with teaching certifications in biology and psychology from The University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL) in 1990. Immediately upon receiving his bachelor's degree, he entered the biological science graduate program at UHCL and graduated with a Master of Science degree in May 1992. While working as a Texas public school teacher at Hightower High School in the Fort Bend Independent School District, he entered the UHCL School of Education graduate program and completed his second Master of Science degree in Educational Management in 2003. In 2005, he accepted a position as assistant principal in the Marlin Independent School District (MISD). During that same school year, he was asked to accept a position as Director of Curriculum and Instruction for not only MISD but for five other school districts within the Falls County Educational Cooperative, where he is currently employed.

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